Experiencing Liminality.Urban Identification, Renting, and Achieving Success among the Newcomers in Astana, Kazakhstan

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Abstract: Kazakhstan, Astana, Migrants, Ethnography, City of the Future, Liminality

The dissertation aims to answer the research question of what it means for various groups of individuals to live in Astana on a daily basis. As the new capital, Astana attracted a large number of internal migrants from various parts of Kazakhstan, who searched for better prospects and lives. Officially, the new capital is promoted by Kazakhstan's government as "city of the future" and regards it as President Nazarbayev's (1991-2019) most successful project. The dissertation offers an ethnographic contribution to urban experiences of migrants in Central Asia. The dissertation is divided into five main chapters. Chapter one offers an introduction to the theme and outlines major theoretical framework and the methodology on which the research is based. I apply the theory of the co-production of space (the social production and social construction of space) outlined by Setha Low to integrate the 'spatial' aspect as an integral part of my research. In addition, I employ the concept of liminality (Turner, 1967, Thomassen, 2014) as the central idea to analyze the stories of my informants. Within this framework, I argue that Astana's unique urban space supports the emergence of liminal *personae*, liminal housing arrangements, lifestyles and career aspirations which are mutually connected and influence each other. Accordingly, the second chapter describes the newcomers who are defined as 'priezzhie' and occupy an in-between status. The third chapter looks at housing and focuses on renting in shared flats. The fourth chapter is about the dating experiences of young women. The last chapter is about achieving success and career aspirations of newcomers. In conclusion, I argue that liminality explains the temporary fixation of the ambiguous, conflicting, and unstable order which has emerged for many newcomers in Astana.

Zusammenfassung: Kasachstan, Astana, Migranten, Ethnographie, City of the Future, Liminality

Die folgende Dissertation beschäftigt sich mit dem Thema Stadtmigration in Astana (Kasachstan) und befasst sich mit der Forschungsfrage wie das Alltagsleben von Zugezogenen in der neuen Hauptstadt von Kasachstan aussieht. Mein Ziel war es, die verschiedenen Facetten des Alltagslebens und die daraus folgenden Herausforderungen zu untersuchen. Astana, seit 1997 die neue Hauptstadt von Kasachstan, wird oft das "Dubai Zentralasiens" genannt. Die kasachische Regierung wirbt für Astana als einen Grundpfeiler der neuen kasachischen nationalen Identität und als ein Symbol für das moderne, westliche, reiche neue Kasachstan. Die kasachischen Eliten feiern Astana als einen Triumph von Präsident Nazarbayev. Meine Forschung beruht darauf, dass ich vielfältige Selbsterzählungen von Kasachen sammelte, die nach Astana kamen um es zu "erobern". Damit leistet die Dissertation einen Beitrag zur urbanen Ethnographie in Zentralasien.
Die Arbeit besteht aus fünf Hauptkapiteln. Kapitel eins umfasst die Einleitung und legt die theoretische und methodologische Grundlage der Arbeit fest. Der theoretische Ansatz von Setha Low „co-production of space" (the social production and social construction of space) leitet die Forschungsfrage und der Begriff von Liminality (Turner 1967, Thomassen, 2014) wird als zentrales Grundkonzept die Analyse der Arbeit begleiten. Kapitel zwei beschreibt die Zugezogenen und definiert diese als priezzhie, die sich im Status von „in-between" befinden. Kapitel drei beschreibt die Wohnsituation junger Zugezogener in Astana und Kapitel vier schildert das Single Leben von jungen Frauen. In den letzten Kapiteln geht es darum, welche Möglichkeiten und Chancen sich den Zugezogenen bieten, ihre Träume und Vorstellungen umzusetzen. Zusammenfassend lässt sich sagen, dass die Erfahrungen, welche Zugezogene in Astana machen, sehr gut als Beispiele für liminal personae und liminales Wohnen verstanden werden können.

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Astana: Political and Historical Background

Kazakhstan is the second largest country of the former Soviet Union, after Russia, and, with rich natural resources, it is aiming to become a political and economic leader in Central Asia. The country has experienced rapid growth due to the export of oil and gas starting from 2000 and onwards. In Central Asia, Kazakhstan is the only country to have transformed its capital city by investing vast amounts of state funds to give the city a new, futuristic appearance with spectacular architecture meant to impress. Astana is nothing like other post-Soviet capitals and thus serves as a unique urban context in Central Asia. Situated in the northern, central part of Kazakhstan on the Ishim River in a semi-desert steppe region, Astana is not an attractive site because of its windy and cold winters. Originally, Astana was a Siberian Cossack fortress with the name Akmolinsk, during the Russian imperial era, and a major railway junction later in the 20th century. Then, it was renamed Tselinograd or 'Virgin Lands City' in the 1950s as part of Khrushchev's plan to cultivate grain in the region. Many Russians were resettled here as part of Khrushchev's Virgin Lands campaign, and later deported ethnic German Russians found their way here (Cummings and Hinnebusch 2011: 17). After Kazakhstan gained independence, its name was changed to Aqmola. In the aftermath of the fall of Soviet Union, Aqmola's economy suffered when its factories and plants closed down, causing massive unemployment. In 1997, the town became Kazakhstan's capital and was shortly afterwards renamed Astana. With this, a new impressive chapter began for this once-unknown, dusty, provincial town.

Nursultan Nazarbayev (1991-2019), former First Secretary of the Soviet Kazakh Republic, became the first president of independent Kazakhstan. Nazarbayev justified the transfer of the capital with the need to move the capital away from international borders

(China and Kyrgyzstan) and locate it in the center of the country (Nazarbayev 2005). In his 2005 book, *In the Heart of Eurasia*, President Nazarbayev implied that the future of Kazakhstan was at stake and directly depended on the transfer of the capital. The book reads as a justification for the transfer and building the capital thereafter. It shows Nazarbayev as a wise leader and a visionary who changed the history of independent Kazakhstan by moving the capital. Astana was supposed to bring progress and change to the whole country, but first it had to change its look to be worthy of becoming a symbol for the regeneration of Kazakhstan, its hope, belief, and confidence in the future (2005: 17). In his 2006 book, *Kazakhstan's Path*, Nazarbayev emphasizes the special role of Astana in the creation of not only a political, but also a cultural and the business center for Kazakhstan (ibid.: 259). He asserts that the constructing the capital will spread patriotism and increase confidence in the government (Nazarbayev 2006). Thus Astana is a utopian dreamscape that is supposed to bring about progress and development to the whole country.

Moreover, Nazarbayev attributes to Astana a major role in Eurasia as a 'bridge' between Europe and Asia. He invokes the ancient 'Silk Road,' whose routes connected Inner Asia with Western Asia and the Mediterranean world, North Africa, and Europe. His underlying ambition is to combine the best practices of Asian cultures with the technological advancements and modernity of the West. Kazakhstan is presented as both Asian and European, an in-between situation, which it uses skillfully to maneuver among demands for greater political liberalization coming from the West, while actually adopting market liberalization without political liberalization, like China and Singapore. The transfer to Astana was thus also a move away from Almaty's colonial heritage. With Astana the president is immortalized. Astana contributes to the cult of his personality.

Although Nazarbayev successfully launched liberal market economy reforms and privatized most of the country's state assets, his commitment to political liberalization is just West-appeasing rhetoric. Many believe the decision to move the capital from Almaty to

Astana, which means “capital” in Kazakh, was a sole decision by President Nazarbayev (Eschment 2001). In contrast to Almaty, which is in the south of the country, Aqmola was located in the center of Kazakhstan and offered open space for the president to realize his ambitious goals (Wolfel 1998). It is not known exactly how much public financing was spent to build the new capital. Officially, the estimates are around $10 billion, but it is believed the cost greatly exceeds this sum (Anacker 2004). The expensive move to one of Kazakhstan’s coldest cities, however, was not embraced by the country’s population. Many Kazakh citizens remained critical and confused by the decision and regarded it as an experiment that would prove itself a success or a failure. Open public debate regarding the move did not take place due to limited freedom of the press and a general atmosphere of censorship. Many have linked the decision to ethnic factors, since the northern parts of Kazakhstan are more heavily populated by ethnic Russians. So the move has been seen as an attempt to extend the influence of ethnic Kazakhs and central government over the country’s territory.

World-renowned architects, such as the Japanese architect Kisho Kurokawa and the British architect Lord Norman Foster, designed the look of Astana. The competition for Astana’s general plan was won by Kisho Kurokawa, whose 2011 Master Plan included the idea of a sustainable city to adopt new changes and harmoniously absorb the old city (Köppen 2009; Bissenova 2012). However, this plan was later changed to accommodate the designs of local architects, who were responsible for the implementation of the final Astana capital plan (Bissenova 2012). Large-scale architectural projects were realized in Astana, as oil money was spent on government buildings, a presidential palace, a mosque, and many parks and monuments. Astana’s architecture is indeed striking since it includes a variety of styles, materials, and themes. A pagoda-like Chinese-palace with a moving penthouse restaurant stands next to a Russian business center made completely from shiny blue glass. Along Nurzhol Boulevard, fountains, flowerbeds, and brick paving stones are carefully arranged. Also along Nurzhol Boulevard, a beautiful white marble mosque and a 40-story housing block

made from glass stand out. Everything is big, spacious, and bright, while fountains add a mood of festivity. Most of the new monumental buildings were constructed on the left bank of the Ishim River, where, in the late Soviet era, only a handful of summer huts (dachas) were located. This became the new administrative section of the city, where the state ministries, the Supreme Court, embassies, KazMunaiGas (the state gas company), and other important buildings are located. It is called the *Left Bank*. The highlight of Astana's architecture, Baiterek Tower, is the main tourist attraction here. In addition, desirable icons of 'world class' amenities, which include upscale hotels, shopping malls, entertainment resorts, opera houses, and an airport (Ong 2011: 17-18), were all built in little over a decade. The old town referred to as the *Right Bank* has changed, too. Roads are being repaired. Old buildings were refurbished and their exteriors painted. New housing compounds appeared, creating a stark contrast with the dilapidated Soviet-era five-story housing blocks, called *Khrushchevkas.* In short, provincial Soviet Tselinograd was transformed into a futuristic capital city and became a showcase of the 'new,' modern, prosperous, and progressive Kazakhstan.

Thus, the expectations of President Nazarbayev and the population of Kazakhstan from Astana are not small, as the new capital is destined to demonstrate to the whole world the achievements of independent Kazakhstan and its president. Kazakhstan's international accomplishments were hosting the OSCE Summit and Winter Asian Games in 2011. In 2010, Kazakhstan took over the OSCE chairmanship, which was successfully used by Kazakhstan for self-promotion and to present the new capital's achievements (Wolowska 2010).

Theoretical Framework: Co-Production of Space

This research is situated within the broad field of post-socialist urban studies. I analyze the experiences of newcomers in the new urban milieu of Astana and try to answer the question of what it means for various groups of individuals to live in the new city on a daily basis. The work is an ethnographic contribution to the urban experiences of migrants, which focuses on emerging urban identities, social relations and concrete practices, as well as ways

of adapting to, and appropriating urban space. The challenges of doing ethnography in urban contexts have produced different approaches, which divide scholars into two groups. One group argues for anthropology *of* the city, where the city is a totality, a specific 'social institution' affecting and inducing certain social outcomes, while the other group defends the classic anthropological research *in* the cities.

The classic approach advocates conducting fine-grained ethnography *in* the city as exemplified in studies of different marginalized populations, such as ethnic groups, the poor, the unemployed, and women, and studies of the networks within such groups (Soja 1996; Pardo and Prato 2012). This approach also includes studies of migration that focus on social organization, kinship, networks, and ethnic enclaves with detailed ethnographies in urban settings (Brettel 2000). A second group of scholars views the city or the "urban" as a significant factor, which shapes the everyday practices and produces accounts that characterize and punctuate the distinctions of given cities. Such research includes studies on 'representational cities' such as the 'imagined socialist utopia' of Brasília, which was planned by architects from the onset, and 'the ethnic city,' where discourses sustain strong group stereotypes, and the 'gendered city.' Here, scholars focus on the larger political economy of the city, which marks its distinction (Low 1996: 386-391). Following this line, Ulf Hannerz (1980) incorporates urban life into his network study, in which structural political factors are included as an attempt to integrate the spatial into an analysis of networks.

In a similar move towards anthropology *of* the city, scholars have tried to incorporate the spatial into their analysis of the social relations that happen in urban contexts. In doing so, they try to capture how urban space is constitutive of social interactions and emergent social processes. To this end, Henri Lefebvre's book, *The Urban Revolution* (2003), which he published in French in 1970 theorizes the urban in a novel way, and lays the ground for his well-known later publication, *Production of Space* (1991) [*La Production de l'espace*, 1974]. Lefebvre integrates urban space and the role of urbanization in the accumulation and

reproduction of capital (Goonewardena et al., 2008*)*. His work is relevant to understanding the present dominance of metropolitan everyday lives, where "urbanity" becomes the regulative idea of the urban life (ibid.). To be precise, one needs to look at material production (perceived), knowledge production (conceived), and the production of significance (experienced) as a whole, which together make up the "urban." Such an epistemology of space can be helpful for remaining critical of how urban space is produced in the age of post-Fordism and flexible capitalism as "each mode of production produces its own space" (Ronneberger, 2008: 136). In this way, Lefebvre rejects the duality of 'cultural studies' and 'political economy.' However, he is overquoted and has become synonymous with 'doing space' or 'being postmodern,' which leads, according to some, to confusion regarding his ideas (Goonewardena et al. 2008: 28).

Lefevbre remains extremely significant. He influenced other urban theorists, notably David Harvey's S*ocial Justice in the City* (1973), which asserts that cities are nodes for concentration and circulation of capital, and Edward Soja's *Postmodern Geographies* (1989) with its notion of *thirdspace*. More importantly, cityspace, which was previously regarded as relatively fixed politically and socially, has become central to urban research; and "the spatial," constructed out of a multiplicity of social relations across all spatial scales, is now integral to the production of the social world (Massey 1994: 4). Moreover, the growth of cities has made urban space highly relevant across many geographies of varying spatial reach, linked to the rise of transnational flows of ideas, information, knowledge, money, and people (Amin 2000; Appadurai 1996; Sassen 2000). Cities no longer exist as bounded spaces, but rather as sites in global social and economic flows and networks (Amin 2007: 101). Hence, there is a broad acceptance that "space matters" (Massey 2005) and can no longer be viewed as a neutral or abstract medium, where social, economic and political processes simply take place. However, space is never a completed product; it is continuously being made and remade (ibid.: 9).

Against this background of taking space seriously Setha Low argues for the co-production of space: the social production and social construction of space in *The Anthropology of Cities:Imagining and Theorizing the City* (1996) and advocates anthropology *of* the city rather than *in* the city. In this way, Low combines the anthropology *of* the city with classic anthropology conducted *in* the city. However, she cautions against essentializing the city as such, based on certain physical aspects or types of social interaction. Instead, she looks at social relations, symbols, and political economies in the city and views the "urban" as 'a process rather than as a type or category' (Low, 1996: 384). Everyday practices or urban lives then serve as links to cultural and social macroprocesses. The production of space, evoking Lefebvre, concerns the political and economic formation of urban space, where processes of material creation are the result of economic, social, ideological, and technological factors (ibid.). "The planning, design, and construction of the city are processes of social production responsible for shaping the urban environment, encoding it with intentions and aspirations, uses and meanings that are often themselves contentiously produced" (Low and Lawrence-Zuniga 2003: 20). As for the social construction of space, Low defines it as, "the actual transformation of space – through people's social exchanges, memories, images, and the daily use of the material setting – into scenes and actions that convey symbolic meaning" (ibid.: 24). I also position my research within this conceptualization and framing of urban space.

Spatial environments, conceived by politicians and urban planners contain signs and symbols, which create a certain representation of space that is accepted or rejected by a city's inhabitants (Gottdiener and Budd, 2005). The discourse on Astana as the "city of the future" is a state-sponsored project. Along these lines, Laszczskowski states, "Both Brasilia and Astana are nation-state capitals conceived as 'exemplary centres' (Geertz, 1980) to radiate progressive social change out into the surrounding country" (2012: 13). However, such ideologies are not univocally accepted by diverse individuals. As political elites and urban planners design future images of the city, these intentions and messages may not coincide

with the spatial experiences of urban residents (Low and Lawrence-Zuñíga, 2003: 20). Therefore, how individuals experience the city is not determined by larger social and economic structures, but also shaped by their perceptions, mental maps, and spatial practices. In this connection, Michel De Certeau (1984) picks up on the routinized, ordinary, subjective, and spontaneous everyday practices of citizens who experience the city directly and who, through their curiosity and creativity, subvert the dominant discourse of the state's regulatory logic. While the official city is overloaded with the logic of planning and spatial order, these are negotiated by everyday users; people have different "spatial stories" to tell, based on how they use the city (ibid.). Thus, de Certeau is concerned with how subjects make room for themselves in urban spaces, despite maps, plans, rules and schemes, and use their "private" maps. To "actualize space," in de Certeau's phrasing, is to create new contexts of the city through narratives and practice. In a similar vein, Humphrey shows how shamans vitalize urban places by "re-envisioning them in relation to other spaces and times and turning them into sites of energy" (Humphrey, 2002: 205). To be sure, de Certeau has been criticized for merely making his subjects, the consumers, more creative, such that subverting official discourses or urban planning is merely performed through "walking, reading, decorating, and cooking" (Goonewardena et al., 2008: 130). Thus, built environments play an active role, but city inhabitants are not passive actors. They create new contexts and meanings in and of the city.

With this brief introduction of studies of space, I have outlined the broader ideas in urban studies, which helped me direct my specific research focus. With regard to the production of space, it is important to note the political economy within which urban spaces in Kazakhstan are being shaped. The restoration of state-imposed spatial regimes is characterized by the nationalization of urban life and city imaginaries, and a neoliberal approach to consumerist culture paralleling the privatization of public space (Darieva et al., 2011). However, I am not interested in exploring how Astana's urban space is produced as

such, but rather with transformation of Astana's space through newcomers' social exchanges and daily experiences with the material setting.

The "urban" is an integral part shaping everyday lives of Astana's residents. Specifically, the "urban" is defined here by Astana discourse as "city of the future" and the corresponding built environment to support this message encoded in the language of the urban planners. Specifically, I am interested in exploring the ways in which and to what degree people's activities, identities, and social relations are influenced by Astana's state-imposed urban imaginary and, in turn, how space is transformed through daily use of the material setting into scenes and actions that convey symbolic meaning (Low, 2009; De Certeau, 1984). In doing so, I wish to show how the urban space of Astana is constitutive of social interactions and emerging practices. Astana's extraordinary cityscape, varying perceptions of the urban design and its built forms contribute greatly to accepting or rejecting by its residents specific social processes and social relations. I ask what social practices emerge and contribute to which subjectivities and spatialities. How do these different groups then interact with each other in producing specific socialities and ideas about living in this urban space? I explore the ways in which newcomers 'actualize space' as they negotiate cityspace, ideologies, and discourses about Astana, in De Certeaus's terms (1984), thus creating new contexts and meanings of the city by making use of various new social and economic opportunities. Here, the social is shaped by the "city of the future" discourse and narratives about progress and development. Within this frame, I argue that Astana's unique urban space supports the emergence of liminal *personae* and liminal housing types, everyday lifestyles, and practices which are mutually connected and influence each other. Turner's (1967) concept of liminality is especially useful for interpreting the stories and positions of my informants, who navigate through multiple, often contradictory and conflicting ideologies and realities.

Liminality

I apply the concept of liminality as it is applied to contemporary times under the influence of consumerist and globalized culture, by Bjorn Thomassen in his recent book, *Liminality and the Modern: Living through the In-Between* (2014). Thomassen asks how we can employ the concept of liminality to understand current social, cultural and political processes. Since the postmodern turn in the 1980s, liminality has come to be viewed as positive. Freedom and innovation have been welcomed, while sacred norms were mocked, and authority questioned (ibid.: 1). The author argues that "liminality" is attractive because it is about boundary breaking. In anthropology, the liminal has been applied to notions of fluid or hybrid culture, where several groups occupy liminal socio-spatial positions (Thomassen 2012: 24). These ideas are influenced by Turner who valued the potential of "anti-structure" thusly, "if liminality is regarded as a time and place of withdrawal from normal modes of social action, it can be seen as potentially a period of scrutinization of the central values and axioms of the culture in which it occurs" (Turner 2008 [1969]: 167). Liminal periods may be single moments, as well as long periods of time, sometimes even epochs during which not only single individuals undergo rites of passage, but also larger groups, and even whole societies. As for liminal places, these may be concrete places or thresholds, like doorways, villages, and towns (ibid.). Prisons, monasteries, and airports provide examples of zones of liminality; pilgrimages and monasteries constitute what Turner calls the "institutionalization of liminality" (2008 [1969]: 109). This happens when the liminality becomes a permanent condition. Liminality has also been used as synonymous with "marginality" for socially excluded people, but Thomassen argues that liminality and marginality are two different terms (2014).

Liminality is also used to analyze travel and tourism. In *Liminal Landscapes: Travel, Experience, and Spaces In-Between: Contemporary Geographies of Leisure, Tourism and*

Mobility, Andrews, Roberts et al. (2012) discuss how the concept of liminality is applied to contemporary contexts. They examine how specific landscapes linked with traveling give rise to practices of liminality, and what temporal qualities these places have. Liminality also applies to "psychological intentionality of being" (ibid.: 1). Beaches and the seaside are seen as typical liminal landscapes, which are also associated with transgressive, carnivalesque behaviors and impressions of unlimited 'freedoms' (ibid.: 4). Liminality here is linked to ideas of "ludic, consumption, deterritorialization, and the inversion or suspension of normative social and moral structures of everyday life;" but liminal spaces also possess a dark side associated with "racial tension, death, fear, and uncertainty" (ibid.: 5-6).

The notion of liminality, originates in *Les Rites de Passage* (1909 [1960]) [The Rites of Passage] by Arnold van Gennep, and includes three sub-categories: rites of separation, rites of transition, and rites of incorporation. Van Gennep notes that all societies use rites to demarcate transitions. The classic example is a rite of passage into manhood, where boys are subjected to a series of tests and personality-changing ordeals. Victor Turner (1967, 1969) writes about rites of transition, or *limen*, in reference to Ndembu rites of passage. The liminal period is a highly ambiguous phase, during which the destruction of the previous status or state takes place, while a new status has not yet emerged. Turner writes, "Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial" (2008 [1969]: 95). These liminal *personae* are "threshold people" and thus escape classifications that locate states and positions in a cultural structure; they are in between positions (ibid.). As such, liminality is a preparation for a new status. By 'state' Turner understands relatively fixed or stable mental, physical, emotional, and ecological conditions (1967: 94). Social structures that organize and mark status, relationships, and behaviors are fixed with stable meanings and values, but change does occur and its significance is highlighted through cultural rituals. Likewise, when individuals undergo a physical change such as birth, puberty, maturing, ageing, or dying, these transitions

are marked by cultural rituals (Boland 2013). Hence, the role of ritual is to define and give meaning to this change – "it symbolically performs change" (ibid.: 229). Structures are suspended and order is temporary dissolved for neophytes undergoing the ritual. I consider newcomers in Astana as liminal *personae* who are "betwixt-and-between" and undergo identity transformation, be it from rural to urban or urban to Astanaian. They seek to become "new" Astana residents. In this process, old demarcations such as urban-rural animosities and regional divides become temporary and insignificant, since anyone can turn into an *Astanchanin/ka* eventually. Newcomers are ambivalent about their status transformation, but divisions are suspended for the sake of becoming an Astanaian.

Furthermore, Thomassen claims that, from the 16th century onwards, liminality became established as the core of the European project in which play, comedy, gambling, sexuality, entertainment, and violence are all aspects of liminality and part of cultural, political, and economic modernity (Thomassen 2014:14). Turner himself argued that in 'modern' societies liminality has been replaced by 'liminoid' moments, which are a "playful as if experience," where one can explore and experiment with activities such as art and leisure (Turner 1983). However, in these playful experiences, the key feature of liminality – *transition* is lost, thus 'liminoid' is divorced from the original meaning of liminality, which is about transformation, as Thomassen argues (2014: 16). For example, bungee jumping as an experience of a dangerous moment lacks a transformation of subjectivity; there is no passage to any "other world" (ibid.). Transition is important, since when transitions do not happen, there is a temporal and spatial fixation of the liminal condition which Arpad Szakolchai calls "permanent liminality," which he also uses to describe the present condition (Thomassen 2014: 28). The author warns against the dangers of extended liminality when transitions do not go smoothly. Thomassen claims, "without a proper re-integration liminality is dangerous, a continuous testing, and a constant search for self-overcoming, breaking down of traditional boundaries might lead to feeling of alienation and loss of being at home" (2014: 30). Hence

the celebratory nature of a liminality, in which people search for excitement and sensory stimulation is desirable. But if it is no longer desired, a sense of imprisonment appears (ibid.: 31). Rituals require closure and an act of integration. Liminality reminds individuals of the importance of security of order, meaning, and its comfort as opposed to chaos and disorder (Boland 2013: 230). In this process, values and beliefs which are taken for granted are once again important and become reaffirmed at the end of a liminal period. Hence, the 'anti-structure' power of liminality is limited.

The liminal properties of contemporary times are connected to openness and indeterminacy. Bauman relates this condition of indeterminacy to the idea of liquid modernity or liquid life, where things are disposable and shifting (Bauman, 2000). In the social sciences, liminality is currently experiencing a revival, but as a "boundless liminality and constant flux," it presents a challenge for how to cope with so much uncertainty (ibid. 2005: 3). Under such conditions, the individual has no choice but to confront the multiple and changing reality and become "even more multiple, more mobile, more polyvalent than his adversary" (Cocker 2012: 64). Individuals must learn to cope with these precarious times by cultivating certain skills and attitudes. I apply the concept of liminality when analyzing how individuals cope with the manifold challenges, discrepancies, disconnections, as well hopes, desires, dreams, and aspirations emanating from their interaction in the new urban space. How different groups of Astana's residents respond and what they make of the new urban context varies. These conditions are best understood as states of liminality, which constrain people within the existing ideologies but also mediate their lives and grant the possibility to realize themselves. Finally, liminality is useful to interpreting Astana's space, since it explains the temporary fixation of the ambiguous, conflicting, and unstable order which has emerged for many newcomers. This order reveals how liminality becomes a "bubble" which entraps people, seducing and promising a great future, while they have to view the present as a temporary, transitional, passing phase and thus insignificant. Liminality can serve as a justification for

factual disconnections, since temporary suspension of the social and moral order turns these shortcomings meaningless. Hence, living in Astana is a preparation for change, with all the ensuing consequences, like anxiety or euphoria, which accompany transitions as such.

Methodology: Being an Outsider and Insider

In *Anthropology in the City: Methodology and Theory* (2012), Italo Pardo and Giuliana B. Prato state that the city is a rather new field in sociocultural anthropology struggling to establish its status. Their research highlights the methodological challenges, the complexity, feasibility, and importance of ethnographic research in urban settings (ibid.: 3). Urban life is messy and makes it difficult to define the field and select informants, to name only two complexities. In this regard, Ash Amin, advocates for a relational politics of space, but points to the complexity inherent in cities, that is, "the constant tension in urban life between fixity and flow, statis and change, integration and fragmentation, diversity and commonality has to be acknowledged explicitly as an analytical and political challenge" (2007: 104). With half the world's population already living in urban areas, these issues will become even more relevant in the future (Amin 2007).

Pardo and Prato advocate for anthropology *of* the city, where the focus is urban, which itself is complex and interconnected in many ways (2012). Echoing Massey (2005) and Low (2000), their claim is that urban space or the city is not just a context, but needs a tool kit of its own to analyze what it is that makes cities share things in common. There is a danger in this line of argument of essentializing the city as a special kind of site which requires its own method, argues Toulson in her recent review of Pardo and Prato (Toulson 2015). Space makes new forms of sociality possible, but does not determine them, and in this way it is useful to recall what Low (1996) proposes, namely, to see the urban as a process rather than a fact. Toulson argues, "Ideally, urban anthropology should just be anthropology after all, particularly if, methodologically, we remain committed to ethnographic fieldwork, through thick and thin" (2015: 40). I accept this approach and consider Astana's urban space neither

as a passive background, nor as a fact determining the outcomes of social process. My research aims to give an ethnographic account of the life experiences of some Astanaians, based on their stories of moving to and making a living in the new capital.

My findings are based on participant observation and in depth-interviews collected during four months of fieldwork in Astana in 2009 and three months there in 2010. My methodology employs qualitative research methods, which includes ethnographic descriptions and detailed accounts of informants' experiences and personal stories. When I first arrived in Astana in August 2009, I had no contacts, just a friend of a friend from Kyrgyzstan who agreed to host me for a few days, until I found an apartment for the next few months. My first informants were from the *setevoi marketing*,[1] who attended a three-day training with me. There I interviewed eight people in total. Some of my most interesting conversations took place there in the building cafeteria, where people told me about their lives in Astana while we drank tea. I used the time during breaks to meet people and observe who came to such meetings to get involved in *setevoi marketing*. I also learned that finding a job in Astana was one of the biggest problems in the "city of the future." Many people were interested in *setevoi marketing*. It was people 20 to 30 years old who made up the majority, but there were also middle-aged and elderly people who were looking for jobs in Astana. The audience was mixed. Locals, as well as newcomers, from towns and rural areas were there. And this is where I met Ivan (discussed in Chapter 4) who, although being suspicious of me at first, later told me about his dreams and hopes. I also met people at the Toastmaster's Club, an English-language club where young people trained at delivering speeches and becoming leaders.

During the first visit in August 2009, I gathered a lot general information about the city. I approached people in parks, in the *bazaars*, during walks along the riverbank promenade where people had time to talk and were relaxed. I met a few students and professors at the local Eurasian University, who agreed to an interview. I also interviewed

[1] A pyramid scheme.

people at the railway station while they waited for their trains. One informant I met at the local bank, where I opened an account. Through attending a job fair in Astana's congress hall in the city center, I made new acquaintances and new friends. Generally, I did not have problems making contact with potential interview partners and most people agreed to be recorded after learning the purpose of my research. They were curious about me and were glad to talk about Astana.

During my two fieldtrips, I interviewed more than 60 informants. The interviews were on a one-time basis and were recorded and later transcribed. Several times I tried to arrange for a second interview if people agreed, but this happened rarely. The data collected is not a representative sample of Astana's population but nonetheless gives a general overview of the issues newcomers were concerned about upon arriving there. I interviewed 27 males and 33 females. Most (43 out of 60) came from smaller towns or the outskirts of Astana. The majority were ethnic Kazakhs; only 13 were ethnic Russians. Half of them were between 20 to 35 years old. Ten of my informants were locals who lived in Tselinograd already before it was turned into the capital. Most of the interviews were conducted in Russian and a few in Kazakh. I always asked my informants before the interview which language they preferred. Many felt comfortable in Russian although sometimes they mixed in Kazakh phrases. Those who wanted to be interviewed in Kazakh were usually from the age range of 18 to 23.

During my first fieldtrip, I did not interact closely with my informants, which would have required following them on an everyday basis to produce ethnographic data. During my second trip, by contrast, I lived in a shared apartment with typical newcomers, so that I could gain insight and detailed data on living in Astana. My second fieldtrip was very different from the first. I had a chance to interact with my respondents on a day-to-day basis as their roommate in a shared apartment. My six roommates were young single women mostly in their mid-20s, who had moved to Astana within the last couple of years. One of them, Dilnaz, was a local. Through participant observation I got an insight into the everyday lives of my

roommates and their mode of living in shared apartments. I became friends with Dilnaz and Alima since they stayed longer in the apartment than the others; we were about the same age and could relate to each other. Dilnaz was especially open and communicative and had many contacts; I would accompany her often when she went out with friends so that I became more than just her roommate. We shared a room, cleaned, and cooked together frequently; a healthy balance between roommate, friends, useful contact and company when necessary emerged. Although Dilnaz had never been to Kyrgyzstan, she did not consider me, the Kyrgyz, a "foreigner" but someone who was very similar, but a bit different. In this regard, perhaps for her I was no more different than her other roommate Nursuluu, a Kazakh girl from Chimkent, located in southern Kazakhstan, close to Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. Dilnaz, who had been born and raised in Tselinograd, was not very familiar with southern Kazakhstan. She was the main tenant, collected the rent from all of us, and solved whatever conflicts arose among us. Dilnaz frequently changed her roommates and had to keep a necessary distance to maintain her role as manager of our shared apartment. Dilnaz tried to be fair to everyone and avoided taking sides. After the two of us shared a room for about a month, she took two more persons into our room. So suddenly I had to share my room with two more strangers: four people shared the bedroom and three people shared the living room in our two-room apartment. At first, I was surprised and even frustrated that Dilnaz did not care to ask my opinion about sharing our room with two more strangers. However, she made clear that she decided who to take in, and if necessary could ask anyone of us to leave. Clearly, there was power imbalance in our relationship and since it was important for me to stay in the apartment, I had to compromise and submit to her authority. Alima was also unhappy that, instead of five people, there were seven of us living in the apartment. She, too, could not openly express her anger toward Dilnaz because she did not want to move again and search for another apartment. Depending on the situation, I was sometimes closer to Dilnaz and sometimes closer to Alima. But I could not accompany Dilnaz or Alima to their work places; I was only once taken to the

workplace of Dilnaz and spent only a few hours at the travel agency where Alima worked part-time.

At last, my role as a Kyrgyz researcher was important as I occupied the status of an insider because I am from a neighboring country and am intimately familiar with the cultural and political context in Central Asia, but also an outsider who was studying in Germany, thus from the "West." This position made for a number advantages as well as disadvantages. At times, I was taken for a local Kazakh if I did not mention my nationality; at other times, I was a Kyrgyz from the neighboring, poor country, and finally I was taken as a researcher from a Western institution. My personal feelings and attitudes were also mixed among these roles, and I tried to maintain a balance between them. And finally, my role as a young female from a similar cultural context was an important asset for gaining the trust of my roommates, who saw me as their peer facing similar issues and with similar interests. However, my gender was a disadvantage when I encountered young Kazakhstani men, who sometimes did not want talk about the hardships they endured in Astana in front of a young female. They tried to present themselves as tough men who can solve their problems alone and did not complain since it would be "unmanly" to do so.

Moreover, as an ethnic Kyrgyz, on several occasions I encountered condescending attitudes from Kazakhstanis. For instance, at times, I was sarcastically reminded that I might find acquaintances and friends at the local bazaar in the outskirts of Astana. Many referred to the biggest bazaar named *Shanghai,* where many Kyrgyz migrants indeed sold clothing and other goods from Bishkek. Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan, was at that time positioning itself as a transit zone for Chinese goods (Laruelle 2013: 20). Astana's bazaars were replete with Chinese products which were re-imported from Bishkek. The flux of Central Asian labor migrants to Russia and Kazakhstan was visible in Astana, where certain areas were becoming ethnically punctuated. In contrast to the bazaar, the new Left Bank section of the city is "cleared" of these migrants. The vast empty spaces with bright streets were rarely full of

people, which stands in harsh contrast to the lively spaces of the bazaars. Kazakhs, like my female roommates avoided the bazaar area in the evenings because they were afraid drunken migrant men (Kyrgyz or Uzbek) might harass them. Hence, a discourse of dangerous urban spaces inhabited by migrants was being generated. This could be a separate topic of inquiry and I do not focus on it here.

Early in my fieldwork in Astana, wandering in one of the brand-new shopping malls, I happened to ask the 'wrong' person for an interview. A Kazakh man in his late 30s was idly standing alone looking casual. I approached him and asked if I could interview him about the shopping mall and Astana. Instead of answering my question, he asked for my documents. It turned out that he was from the security staff of the shopping mall. When I started inquiring why he needed my documents, he asked me to follow him. We went upstairs to the second floor where the food court was located. There were very few people there. In the meantime, the man called his supervisor who came within a few minutes and started interrogating me about my visit to Astana and asking to check my documents. Even after I showed my documents and explained my purpose in Astana, the two men were still not convinced. They grew more suspicious of me because I am Kyrgyz, I assumed. Then the second man called his supervisor on the phone. The third man joined us. He was in his 50s and wearing a suit. Now, there were three serious-looking men surrounding me and interrogating me as if I were a criminal. I felt intimidated, although I knew these men had no right to ask for my documents. They treated me as if they had caught a thief. Then, the eldest supervisor told me not to approach people and ask 'strange' questions or write anything critical about the shopping mall. They apparently thought I was a journalist. It suddenly became clear to me that the freedom one enjoys in Astana stops when certain issues arise or when someone might be engaging 'suspicious' activity. The mall was empty that afternoon, so the security men did not have much to do. They felt they could question me and so they did. I was afraid that they would take me to the police station. But my documents were fine and I had a proper

registration stamp, so they let me go. This was the only unpleasant experience during my fieldwork.

Existing Research on Astana

Astana has attracted the interest of a number of local, as well as foreign, scholars. The transfer of the capital to Astana has attracted interest in terms of its effect on Russian-Kazakh relations and with regards to Kazakhstan's nationalization policies (Huttenbach 1998; Wolfel 2002; Anacker 2004; Schatz 2004). The works of Alima Bissenova and Mateusz Laszczkowski are especially important to my research, since they touch some of the aspects I also discuss in my book. Bissenova's dissertation titled *Post-Socialist Dreamworlds: Housing Boom and Urban Development in Kazakhstan* (2012) focuses on the impacts of the real estate boom and the housing "bubble" on the emerging, aspiring homeowner, middle classes. She claims that modernization that came to a standstill in the 1990s has been re-generated by the housing boom as an expression of a 'quotidian' modernization project, which is reinforced by the homeowners who support the authoritarian state under the leadership of Nazarbayev (ibid.: 12).

Moreover, Bissenova analyzes discussions of urban planning, the Master Plan of Astana and the actors who participated in those debates and ended up shaping the look of the new capital. She shows how Astana's architecture generated a heated debate among local urban planners as to what exactly is a Kazakh city or Kazakh architecture, in general (ibid.: 56). One prominent Kazakh architect said that Astana's architecture must be 'Eurasian' in character to display national tradition and history and also has to embody the future orientation of Kazakhstan's development (ibid.: 131). In creating Astana's look, Bissenova argues, the Kazakhstan state had to borrow from 'global' expertise and invite established brands and centers of urbanism to achieve a status of 'global' and 'modern' (2012, 2014). The idea was that this 'global' expertise would help Kazakhstan gain symbolic and cultural capital which, in turn, would attract financing and investors to the new capital (2012:129).

Employing global brands and well-known architects also convinced the Kazakh citizens that the new capital was indeed 'modern.' Bissenova compares the Kazakh state to Kazakh nouveau riches, who after obtaining money, try to invest in ways to become more 'cultured' and to enter 'high society' (2014).

Finally, Bissenova's analysis of housing is a very important background for me to describe renting practices in Chapter 3. Bissenova's work shows that many people in Astana were inspired to invest in speculative housing as part of their efforts to catch up with each other. Improving and updating one's housing conditions became intrinsically connected to living out the Astana dream. Astanaians were caught up in an unstoppable 'housing rush.' In contrast to Bissenova, I do not focus on the relatively wealthy homeowners but on the marginalized renters who cannot afford to buy homes or newly built apartments. The renters also dream of purchasing homes, but the dream is unattainable for most of them. The question is how they manage to remain in expensive Astana without prospects for homeownership.

Mateuz Laszczkowski's dissertation, *"City of the Future": Built Space and Social Change in Astana, Kazakhstan* (also 2012), is well known by researchers interested in Astana. Laszczkowski argues that Astana is a 'rational and critical utopia' similar to Brasilia, which stands for a vision of the future combined with a planned ambition for social change (2012: 47). In the same way, Astana mimics socialist projects in that the Kazakhstan state wants to turn a Soviet town into a contemporary capital. For instance, Khrushchev's Virgin Lands Campaign in Tselinograd tried to create a modern Soviet city (ibid.). Against the background of fresh memories of the loss of Soviet social order, Astana repeats the Soviet discourse of constructing a bright future. The Kazakh state, however, does not acknowledge this similarity with the Soviet past and claims to offer a radically new way. Focusing on the seductive effects of Astana's newest architecture and built space, Laszczkowski claims that new buildings "mobilize citizen's agency and capture their imaginations, thus producing complicity" (Laszczkowski 2011: 78). He calls this the "Astana effect," "a sense of cohesive, progress-

oriented sociality directed towards a collective future which affects individuals' imaginings of their personal futures" (ibid.: 84). Employing the notion of hyperreality, he further argues that the official image, or represented Astana, denies the material, social, and even temporal conditions of the city "on the ground." Moreover, when residents are confronted with the disconnection of their everyday lives from the promise of Astana, in their disenchantment and criticism, they do not question the modernization discourse the state promotes of Astana as the "city of the future" (ibid.: 66). In his latest contribution, Laszczkowski argues that, "the state" can be "the locus of awe, hope and desire and disillusionment and trickery" (2014: 168). Among other things he asks "how citizens' subjectivity is shaped in relation to the state and construction" and states that the Astana project is also about the creation of a specific subjectivity, or *grazhdanstevennost'* which "carries the implication of affective or moral engagement" with the state (ibid.: 158). The contributions by Bissenova and Laszczkowski are generally similar; both examine state discourse on building a future and a renewed modernization project embodied in constructing the new capital. The commitment to improve one's material situation exemplified by the dream of homeownership (Bissenova 2012), as well as imagining 'a life radically different and radically better' (Laszczkowski 2011: 90) reveal attachment to modernization projects among Astana residents. Finally, Kazakhstan's longing for modernity, they argue, is very similar to James Ferguson's account of de-industrializing Zambian Copperbelt in his *Expectations of Modernity* (1999), in which he describes how many citizens, similar to these former Soviet ones, endured the abrogation of a promised modernity project.

Another work, geographer Natalie Koch's dissertation, *The City and the Steppe: Territory, Technologies of Government and Kazakhstan's New Capital* (2012) also deals with the technologies of government. The author explores the effects of power beyond the "coercive" methods used to gain popularity in the case of a "development regime," like Nazarbayev's Kazakhstan. Using a Foucauldian "practice-based" approach, Koch aims to

discover the forces and power relations, practices of government and representation, employed in creating a coherent "state." Koch shows the importance of the urban development of Astana to the paternalist state-building project. In this, Kazakhstan's development paternalism is similar to other development regimes (2012: 196). She concludes that, "[a]s imaginary and practice, the unity of the state-society-territory is the crux of how Kazakhstan's independence-era economic and bureaucratic elites have legitimated their control of the vast natural resource wealth lying in the state's domain" (ibid.: 200). In short, the Astana project contributes to the development of strong development paternalism in Kazakhstan.

Koch has published several other articles on Astana. In one of them, "Why Not a World City? Astana, Ankara, and Geopolitical Scripts in Urban Networks," (2013) she argues that Astana is imitating the "hypermodern" image of Dubai, which has managed to become a financial, as well as a transportation hub, in the Arabian Peninsula. However, Astana cannot be called a "world city" unlike Dubai, since Kazakhstan's elite is aware of its underdeveloped infrastructure and inadequate economic and social capacities under state-managed capitalism (2013). Therefore it is advocating for "its own way," a uniquely "Kazakhstani way," which, coupled with Astana's role in state- and nation-building processes, has been used to justify the Astana project both domestically and internationally (ibid.). Indeed, Astana is far from the idea of a "world city" as per Sassen's (2001) definition, when it comes to its position as a command and power center in the global economy.

Kazakhstan wishes to be global and thus seeks to prove its competence to become global. But, as Koch shows, Astana cannot compete with other global cities, at least for now. Fascination with spectacular urban architecture in emerging Asian countries, like China, has been a topic of discussion in scholarly debates in recent years. The most extreme example is Dubai. Other mushrooming, spectacular metropolitan sites in Asia, such as Shanghai's TV tower, Hong Kong's corporate towers, Singapore's Marina Sands complex, and Dubai's Burj

Khalifa are attracting the attention of Western media. Anthropologist Aihwa Ong calls this spectacular architecture "hyperbuildings and spectacles" and applies the term "worlding practice" to describe the urge to achieve global recognition while showing one's own national urban space (2011: 206-207). Ong criticizes such urban developments as postmodern globalization overtaken by transnational capital and as the cooptation of architectural forms by repressive states (2011: 223). Even so, some scholars argue that the emerging cities in the global South and "worlding practice" do not follow the Western standards of urban theories, but generate "new geographies" for imagining the urban (see e.g., Roy 2009). Other scholars view such developments and the addiction to iconic buildings in the Gulf region as "search movements" by states trying to find their own vision and identity, while gaining international recognition (Wippel 2014 et al.). Following this line of thought, one can argue that Astana's "Eurasian" urban space can be seen as simultaneously global and national in this sense. Kazakhstan too wishes to express its vision and identity through spectacular urban sites. Local authors emphasize Astana's importance in the expression of Kazakhstan's political sovereignty. They demonstrate how Soviet Tselinograd is reduced to a past of little historical value, the exact opposite of what Astana stands for today: orientation towards the future (see e.g., Goncharova 2008: 7).

Kazakhstan's desire for international recognition and a global image is also reflected in the work of Adrien Fauve's dissertation (2013). Fauve deals with national branding as a legitimization tool among authoritarian regimes. He focuses on domestic and international sports performances, such as those by Astana Pro Team cycling, in efforts to promote Kazakhstan as a nation state (Fauve 2015: 110). Other events, like the OSCE and the Expo 2017, both contribute to what Fauve calls "globalized Astanization"; "the state-driven promotion of Astana as the main symbol of contemporary Kazakhstan, a renowned place profiled in the international media, the cornerstone of state-and-nation building, a brand that is broadcast on the world arena" (ibid.). Concretely, Fauve examines sports performances

outside Kazakhstan and the internationalization of Astana's Nazarbayev University through the hiring of foreign specialists, which provide examples of national branding and international promotion, and divert attention from the authoritarian nature of the regime (ibid.: 121). Transnational activities by various actors are "a core aspect of global Astanization," which are meant to create a positive image of the nation, irrespective of its regime (ibid.: 116).

Finally, all the post-Soviet states have invested in celebrations of their new national regimes while embracing the market economy and, at least rhetorically, democratic principles and institutions. Baku, like Astana, is also actively engaged in brand-making in an effort to render the city attractive to foreign investors. State officials are trying to brand Azerbaijan as a modern, cosmopolitan, and art-loving nation (Krebs 2011: 107). As a cosmopolitan city, Baku, too, wishes to be the "Dubai of the Caspian" (ibid.) Marginalized or new nation states are especially prone to using this strategy to advance their position in a globalized world (ibid.). These developments are, however, rather new. Prior to brand-making and investing in cities, many post-Soviet countries were contending with the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Such scholars as Catherine Alexander, Victor Buchli and Caroline Humphrey (2007) ask what has replaced the void which resulted from the dismantling of the Soviet Union and the near collapse of the Soviet value system that regulated social relations in the city. Nazpary (2002) vividly demonstrates the chaos [*bardak*] in the early 1990s and the decay of physical infrastructure and social order. Humphrey (2003) and Alexander (2007) focus on the privatization process, with its dismantling of the workplace and labor relations and the painful adjustments to realities of market economy. One common theme scholars address is the fear of *ruralization* in former Soviet cities, the rural migrants of which have flooded cities, especially national capitals, hoping to escape the economically failing countryside (Alexander et al. 2007). Urban dwellers perceive the newcomers as threatening the 'civilization' and modernity of urban spaces that had been achieved during the Soviet period (ibid.). This is an

important aspect, which I also analyze in regards to Astana's migrants. My findings show that, despite growing nationalist sentiments among the titular Kazakh ethnicity, a majority still identify the Soviet Union as a modernizing force that brought many benefits to ethnic Kazakhs. Similar themes are also discussed by Yessenova (2005) on Almaty, Schröder (2010) on Bishkek youth, Kirmse on Osh youth (2010, 2013). All their findings are highly relevant to my own research and I will be referring back to their works throughout the book.

Overview of Chapters

The chapters are divided according to the following themes. In Chapter 2, I define and discuss who the newcomers in Astana are. *Priezzhie*, newcomers, I argue, are transitional beings finding themselves in a 'betwixt-and-between' position (Turner 1967). Specifically, I draw parallels between neophytes' characteristics and their psychological condition while they are undergoing identity transition, and newcomers in Astana who likewise find themselves in an ambiguous category called *priezzhie*. Turner calls the initiates liminal *personae* ('threshhold people') who are in a highly ambiguous state when they are in the midst of the rite; they are 'no longer classified and not yet classified' (Turner 2008 [1969]: 95). For Astana, which is promoted by the Kazakhstan government as a cornerstone of new 'Eurasian' national identity – a multicultural understanding of nationhood of a 'Kazakhstani' state rather than an ethnically defined Kazakh one (Alexander and Buchli 2007: 32), liminality is extremely relevant. Astana as a unifying place bridges ethnic, regional, and rural/urban differences with many groups harmoniously living together as Astana residents or Astanaians and Kazakhstani citizens.

I examine the biographical sketches of informants from different ethnic and regional backgrounds, who all moved to Astana. Alima, who was my roommate, comes from Karaganda, a northern town south of Astana. She occupies a position between a Northerner and a local Astanaian, the latter of which is the desired status after transformation. Arsen comes from the southern village of Merke, close to Kyrgyzstan. His liminal position lies

between being a Southerner and a *priezzhiy*, who does not see himself as ready to be classified as a local Astanaian. In Chapter 2, I also discuss Elena and Masha, who are ethnic Russians; they represent the generational divide marked by independence in 1991 and must cope with the additional challenges of overcoming kazakhification and nationalization. They accept the dominant discourse of nation-building and the primacy of the titular nation, although they suffer from it (Elena's case) and feel unfairly treated (Masha's case). Finally, I turn to local residents of pre-capital Tselinograd, who must accept the influx of newcomers and the fate of their own group being reduced to an insignificant minority in their own town. They have experienced a reversal of status: first, being elevated by automatically becoming residents of the capital, but then feeling pushed to acknowledge their provincial background and identity in comparison to the 'cosmopolitan' and 'sophisticated' newcomers, for example, former Almaty residents. The goal of this chapter is to understand how different newcomers experience their identity upon moving to the new capital. *Priezzhie* are *liminal personae* who undergo an identity transformation and eventually want to become successful Astana residents, 'Astanaians.'

In Chapter 3, I deal with housing practices and renting in Astana. I start with an ethnographic description of how many poor and not-so-poor newcomers who do not own housing in Astana cope with renting room in shared apartments. The whole economy of rented apartments escapes the control and regulation of the state, which leaves it up to market forces to regulate themselves. Neither landlords nor tenants are protected, since most of the time they do not have written tenant agreements. This leaves a lot room to all kinds of ad hoc and informal relations in the rental market. The desire to own a newly finished spacious apartment has become a dream for many newcomers to escape high rental prices and successfully settle in the new capital. The discourse of homeownership is seen as a *normal* aspiration for the aspiring middle classes, while the availability of home loans led to an inflation in housing prices and a housing "bubble." Many entrepreneurs wished to speculate

on the construction boom and on the high demand for housing. My six roommates who shared a two-room apartment in the center of the old town were typical newcomers who did not own apartments or houses and could hardly afford the high rents in Astana. Thousands of newcomers solve their housing dilemma by sharing rented apartments. I argue that renting offers a flexible participation in the "city of the future" and that renters, despite being marginalized and excluded from state-subsidized housing, reinforce the discourse of homeownership and thus also support Astana's ideology of modernization. They wait for years, renting in the hope that they, too, will be able to buy an apartment in Astana one day. For the elderly and for young parents with children, the practice of renting was not a viable solution. For people from the younger generation who were single, renting was seen as acceptable; but for elderly people it was a sign of failure. Renting was seen appropriate as a temporary solution in the liminal phase, but in the long term, it was undesirable. Hence, many renters were stuck in this liminal state, with no prospect of buying a house nor any option to return to their home towns. In this chapter, I also examine the Soviet and post-Soviet institution of *propiska* – residence registration – and the problems it causes for many *priezzhie.*

In Chapter 4, I discuss the leisure activities of local and foreign single women and men in Astana. Specifically, I look at how single women in Astana date and try to find husbands. Astana's urban space provides a new context for young people to mix and socialize with people of different ethnic, social, and cultural backgrounds. This social mixing is considered by many newcomers as unique to Astana's urban space. Urban diversity is caused by the constant inflow of newcomers and foreigners. Astana provides an opportunity for young people to start a new life away from their parents, where they try to be independent and enjoy freedom unavailable in other towns or in villages. Many appreciated this individualizing feature of Astana, where one can live the way he or she chooses. This also includes religious lifestyles connected to transnational Islam. Proliferation of Islamic lifestyles affects dating

patterns among young people, who have more alternatives to choose from. Examining how single women navigate between new freedoms and the constraints of traditional gender roles, I argue that they also experience liminality, being not 'really free' because they need to adjust to new demands from men, consumer culture, and ideas about femininity. Under pressure to conform to these multiple demands, both women and men find themselves free to experiment only so far as it is appropriate. Marriage as an ideal and acceptance of men as head of the family, like house ownership, are reestablished after a period of promiscuity. This is where the limits of the liberating aspects of liminality can be observed. However, the question remains open as to how much individualizing power Astana will have in the future, as a place where imagining alternative lives may become possible and achievable.

The last chapter, Chapter 5, is about realizing goals and achieving success in the 'city of opportunities,' as many refer to Astana. Here, I discuss the career aspirations of young men and women. Various real as well as speculative opportunities have appeared in the private business sector in Astana, as opposed to exciting positions in the state's bureaucracy for those who have studied and gained experience abroad. It becomes clear in this chapter that Astana is built for the political elite who are given privileged access to various resources. For this group of people, moving to Astana is a good investment in terms of career prospects. Others were satisfied with any job with a stable salary, which would still be higher than what they could earn in their home towns and regions. Here too, I present the different personal career trajectories of several young people and show how those young people identify and appropriate the state discourse of the 'elite city.' Those who work for state structures strongly identify with the state and show their loyalty by avoiding expressing criticism and exercising self-censorship. Their loyalty is generously compensated in terms of access to subsidized housing and other bonuses they receive from the state. Many ambitious individuals focus on making careers in the space allowed by accepting the state's development rhetoric. Bolashak

graduates[2] are asked to contribute their knowhow and skills to the state's modernization efforts, while remaining silent about and complicit with Nazarbayev's regime. Ordinary people, who do not see themselves as being in a position to influence or even participate in political life, spend their energies and resources on being hard-working and self reliant. Believing that one can achieve his or her goals and dreams in Astana, many do not give up when things do not unfold in the ways they expected. Instead, many look for alternative means to becoming successful. Thus, not giving up becomes a motto for newcomers who are determined to make the best of their situations. This harsh environment, which does not allow for the acceptance of failure or the real constraints, becomes a liminality trap. The 'waiting space' before achieving the 'Astana dream' becomes extended into an uncertain future, a condition of 'permanent liminality' (Thomassen 2014). Moreover, when actual social practices on the ground prove to be far from the promised image of Astana, the need to explain and make sense of one's experiences becomes especially salient. Hardships, disconnections, and disappointments are discursively turned into meaningful life-transforming experiences.

[2] A government sponsored study-abroad scholarship.

CHAPTER 2. *PRIEZZHIE* AND HOW TO BECOME AN ASTANAIAN

Since the move, Astana has experienced a major influx of internal migrants from all over the country. Provincial Aqmola had about 260,000 inhabitants when it became the capital. According to the Statistical Agency of Kazakhstan, the population of Astana reached 760,500 in 2012.[3] By March 2015, population officially reached 856,900[4] and it is estimated that by 2030 it will reach one million. The actual numbers of Astana's population are much higher due to the high number of unregistered migrants. In addition, there is a high fluctuation due to the dynamics of population movement; people come and go all the time. Moreover, the newcomers are mostly ethnic Kazakhs, which have led to a demographic shift in Astana from a Russian-dominated to a Kazakh-dominated city. The transfer of the capital resulted in population movement from the northern regions of the republic to the new capital. In a sociological study from 2003, local scholars estimate that a majority of internal migrants (89%) came from 'urban localities' (Tatibekov 2005: 59 cited in Lasczszkowski 2012: 84). Zabirova (2002: 215) suggests that one third of all urban migrants to Astana are from the former capital Almaty, and up to 30–40% are rural migrants (ibid.: 18). Moreover, she states that the majority of rural migrants are not represented in statistics because they are not registered and usually work without written contracts (Zabirova 2002).

During my fieldwork in Astana, when I approached my Kazakhstani informants, saying that I was interested in migrants in Astana, they were confused and said, "You mean from Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan and elsewhere?" After I explained that I was interested in internal migrants, they would say, "Ah, you mean *priezzhie."* Most internal migrants are perceived, and identify themselves, not as *migranty*, but as *priezzhie* (singular *priezzhiy*: 'visitor or 'newcomer' in Russian). When my informants said that every other person in Astana is a *priezzhiy*, they meant mostly Kazakhstanis who had come to Astana from different

[3] Astana.kz Retrieved on 2 May 2013. http://www.astanastat.online.kz.
[4] Astana.kz Retrieved on 15 June 2015. http://astana.gov.kz/ru/modules/material/7945

parts of Kazakhstan, who are neither born in nor long-term residents of old pre-capital Tselinograd. Thus, because newcomers to Astana almost never refer to themselves as *migranty*, I use the term newcomers and *priezzhie* to denote this type of migrant. *Priezzhiy* is a rather neutral label, but, depending on context, it may also attach negative characteristics to newcomers, as will be further elaborated upon in this chapter.

It is important to explain the main difference between being a *migrant* and a *priezzhiy*. My Kazakhstani informants first suggested that I should interview Kyrgyz traders from the bazaars because these were the "real migrants," as they put it. The term *migrant* is a Russian label to designate Central Asian labor migrants from Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. This terminology follows public discourse in Russia where *migranty* denotes poor, mostly unskilled workers without *propiska* (registration[5]) or legal work permits. Russia and Kazakhstan have visa-free regimes with other Central Asian countries, so traveling there is legal, but it is illegal to work without permission or reside without a *propiska*. This makes most labor migrants undocumented. Sometimes they are also referred to as G*astarbeitery*, guest workers. Similar to what happened in Russia, the presence of many Uzbek and Kyrgyz unregistered construction workers in Astana during the construction boom reinforced the negative image and label of *migranty* in Kazakhstan. Labor migrants often had their passports confiscated by their Kazakh employers and had to bribe the police to avoid penalties. As for official data and statistics, in Kazakhstan *oralman* (ethnic Kazakh 'returnees') and rural newcomers to cities are listed as *migranty*.

This chapter is about *priezzhie,* who to a large extent, in their diversity, constitute the new population of Astana. A dramatic shift of the social makeup of the city has occurred. As has been documented in migration studies, difficulties fitting into the urban milieu, where host-guest relations are determined by mutual animosities, are not exceptional. The host

[5] *Propiska* is a mandatory admistrative system of registration according to a citizen's place of residence, discussed in detail in chapter 3.

welcomes newcomers "if they learn the rules" (Brettell 2000: 122). When the newcomers learn the rules, they are expected to follow the majority. In the case of Astana, it is the newcomers who have become the majority while the native locals, now a minority, are denigrated as 'provincial' and unimportant. In this new context, I ask what it means to be a *priezzhiy* in Astana. I argue that the ambiguous and transitional status of *priezzhiy* is about the transformation that newcomers experience towards becoming *Astanchanin*, Astanaian. *Priezzhie* are by definition *liminal personae*, as identified by Turner (2008 [1969]), who occupy an undefined status of 'betwixt and between.' A borderline or *limen* marks the change from one status to another in rituals or ceremonies at various critical stages of a person's life. Thus, stories told of arriving in Astana to settle down are about claiming and achieving belonging in the newly emerging society, which in turn involves processes of challenging, as well as reproducing former divisions and categories of identification. This chapter focuses on precisely the state of ambiguity when old identities are no longer salient, but the desired and aspired to 'Astana identity' is not yet fully achieved, let alone recognized by others. Accordingly, I consider *priezzhie* as transitional beings who are deconstructing their old identities, while reconstructing and validating new ones. I follow a constructivist approach to individual and collective identities and processes of identification. "All identities are social, cultural, and historical products" (Donahoe et al. 2012: 8). As such, identities are fluid and multiple ones can co-exist in a person. To analyze how identity transformation plays out among the newcomers in Astana, I first outline the meaning of ethnic identification, regional affiliation, and the importance of the rural-urban divide. Then, I present selected biographical sketches of different *priezzhie* in Astana. Alima and Arsen, *priezzhie* from the northern and southern regions respectively, have progressed far towards becoming Astana residents. Elena and Masha, Russian *priezzhie*, must cope with now being defined as members of a national minority. Russia and anything Russian no longer act as a 'carrier of civilization.' For their successful transformation into Astanaians, they first have to justify belonging in Kazakhstan.

At the end I present Nurzhan, a local, and Natasha from the north to show how they align themselves against the rural *priezzhie*.

Regional and Other Divides

Independent Kazakhstan, like other Central Asian states, could be described as a 'nationalizing state' (Brubaker 2011: 1786), where nationalizing policies and practices have established the primacy of the titular nation at the expense of all other resident ethnic groups, despite inclusive rhetoric. Nationalizing was mostly done to reverse the Russian domination of ethnic Kazakhs. As Kuzio summarizes, "In the majority of cases, Russians have been re-defined from "elder brothers" to colonizers and removed from the public sector, business, banking and law" (2002: 257). What followed were attempts at state building and the consolidation of national identities through a reconstruction of national histories to legitimize the new states by looking back to pre-Soviet 'golden eras.' Rejection of the Soviet historical framework is an act of re-claiming the past and collective memory by the titular nation (ibid.: 260). Kazakhs welcomed these changes while Russians and other non-Kazakhs were rightly deeply concerned. What followed was outmigration of the Russian population to Russia in the 1990s, which slowed due to a rise in living standards and the economic boom of the 2000s. In addition, the successful modernization discourse initiated and promoted by President Nazarbayev promises prosperity for all Kazakhstanis regardless of ethnicity, which gives a sense of security to non-Kazakhs. Nevertheless, Russians' status remains a highly sensitive issue in Kazakhstan with uncertainties looming in the future.

At present, the Kazakhstan state oscillates between a blatant nationalization policy and a real commitment to inclusion of its Russian population and other non-Kazakhs. The relative number of ethnic Kazakhs has increased since independence in 1991 due to the president's initiative of a comprehensive "repatriation" program for ethnic Kazakhs from abroad to their historical homeland. The government has spent one hundred and thirty million US dollars on

re-settlement benefits for *oralman* (Kazakh returnees), providing free housing, transportation, employment assistance, and other benefits (Barkus and Werner 2010; Diener 2009; Mendikulova 2012). To address rising concerns about discrimination against its minorities, Kazakhstan has tried to navigate between promotion of the primacy of Kazakhs and inclusion of its Russian and Russian-speaking population. To this end, President Nazarbayev has proclaimed himself the protector of ethnic minorities within a state discourse of portraying 'inter-ethnic harmony' to international audiences (Eschment 2011). When Kazakhstan chaired the OSCE (2010-2011), President Nazarbayev put religious and ethnic tolerance on the agenda and presented these as Kazakhstan's major achievements (Schmitz and Somfalvy 2011). In addition, the state ideology of 'Eurasianism' supports a multicultural understanding of nationhood as a Kazakhstani state, rather than an ethnically defined Kazakh state (Alexander and Buchli 2007: 19). Furthermore, Astana plays a key role in promoting the idea of 'Eurasianism' because, in the words of the president, it is, "a bright, strong, prosperous city which unites all of Kazakhstan's people" (Nazarbayev 2010: 53 cited in Koch 2013: 2). Nonetheless, meaningful integration of the Russian population beyond empty declarations of inter-ethnic harmony remains a real challenge for Kazakhstan. Many Kazakhstani Russians remain skeptical and complain about *Kazakhization*, unofficial or semi-official tactics to promote the ethnic Kazakhs' political, linguistic, and cultural rights at the expense of those of non-Kazakhs.

The concepts of ethnic and national identities were shaped by the Soviets in soviet Kazakhstan when titular ethnicities were promoted in the early 20th century and with time their salience increased (Martin 2001; Brubaker 1994; Slezkine 1994). The typical attributes of a nation state, such as national territory, national language, a national elite, and national culture were all created. Despite pronouncements of equality among all nations, ethnic Russians, Russian language, and Russian culture were from the 1930s on promoted as superior to that of the titular nations in soviet Central Asia. Russians were perceived as

'cultured,' bringing modernization and civilization to the local populations (Davé 2007; Martin 2001; Kuzio 2002). A cultural hierarchy was established, with Russian culture on the top (Adams 2011). In this regard, Laura Adams (2010:13) rightly suggests situating the socialist and post-socialist national identity culture in a broader context of Soviet modernism, which has a continuous influence in the region. "Much of the promotion of local culture today is in a similarly close – and defensive – dialogue with Soviet discourse." (Adams 2011: 211) In line with this, the continuing salience of national identification in multi-ethnic Soviet and post-Soviet Kazakhstan is evident. Thus, artificial borders and national delimitation remain a controversial colonial legacy of the Soviet Union in Central Asia. One can conclude that independence has re-established the salience of national identity based on ethnic affiliation.

In a similar line to promoting superiority of Russian ethnicity, urbanization in Soviet Central Asia was also connected to Russification of the region. The numbers of Russians and other Russian-speaking ethnic groups were disproportionally high in cities, which made urban spaces culturally, socially, and linguistically primarily 'Russian' spaces. This was one of the outcomes of the speedy industrialization that the Soviets undertook in Central Asia by bringing in Russian specialists to fill in various technical positions for which locals were not qualified. In this way, the construction of urban space as a Russian and simultaneously a 'cultured' space was continuously strengthened until the Soviet Union dissolved. Against this background, urbanity and modernity came to signify Russianness while Kazakhness stood for rurality and underdevelopment (Yessenova 2005). Kazakhs had to learn Russian and adopt Russian modes to make careers in cities, which laid the foundation for the urban-rural divide essentializing cultural difference along 'modern' and 'backward' lines (Dave 2007; Yessenova 2005; Nazpary 2002) or 'Western' and 'Eastern,' correspondingly (Laszczkowski 2012). Russians rarely mixed with people from the titular nation and did not learn their language, regarding them as 'inferior' and 'provincial' (Kuzio 2002: 260). In a similar way,

Kazakh urban residents tried to limit their interaction with their kin from the villages (Laszczkowski 2012).

Notions of 'urbanity' and 'rurality' developed into distinctive identity markers as a result of the superiority of urban life. Starting from the 1930s, the Soviet city was seen as 'the cradle of progress and modernity' and city life became quite different from the rural way of life (Alexander and Buchli 2007). Due to their privileged status, cities received the lion's share of investment in physical and social infrastructure, leaving villages far behind in terms of development and quality of life. Soviet efforts to 'modernize' and 'civilize' the Central Asian region meant building infrastructure to improve the living conditions of the local population by securing electricity and gas, laying out asphalt roads, and bringing public transportation like trams and trolleybuses, which were all directed to the urbanites in the first place (Stronski 2011: 4). These efforts increased social and economic inequalities between the countryside and cities. Urban life and everything linked to it, including the Russian-language, science, technology, and education, became automatically superior and 'modern' in contrast to village life (Alymbaeva 2013). City life hence became not only attractive, but also a privilege, a kind of 'spatial capital' available only for a limited group of citizens. The strict Soviet registration policy of *propiska* prevented people from moving freely from the countryside to the cities. Details of the *propiska* are elaborated in Chapter III. For most villagers, cities remained a far and different reality, which they had an opportunity to admire from time to time while visiting their relatives there, if they had any. Consequently, long-time city dwellers – regardless of ethnic affiliation – asserted their superiority over rural people, which enabled them to exert power, symbolic as well as factual, over the latter (Yessenova 2005). The urban mode of life – or more accurately the 'Soviet city mode' is still rated high, meaning 'civilized' in post-Soviet Kazakhstan, as it was in the Soviet period. Following this, I apply the term 'rurals' to demarcate *priezzhie* coming primarily from the villages and use

'urbanites' to refer to *priezzhie* coming from towns and cities, and who have an urban socialization.

Fears generated by the perceived *ruralization* of urban space, experienced by urbanites from the former capital Almaty in the 1990s, were based on this antagonistic division between rurality and urbanity. Almaty was built as a model Soviet city, modern, urban, 'cultured,' and Russified in terms of language and Soviet in terms of lifestyle. As Yessenova shows, the media in the early 1990s was very hostile to rural newcomers in cities, generating fears among urbanites about displaced villagers who were seen as "potentially risky, unstable, and unfit members of the urban society" (2005: 665). In Almaty, the newcomers were portrayed as being 'lost' between two worlds, uprooted from their familiar milieu, while not yet successfully adjusted to their new one. The hard transition years in the 1990s further increased anxiety about the loss of urbanites' familiar environment and many citizens have referred to 'chaos' to describe those times (Nazpary 2002). More so, newcomers to the cities were harassed by the police, mostly for lack of *propiska* (Yessenova 2005: 670). Those newcomers who moved from the villages to Almaty were clearly demarcated as rurals (auldiktar) vs. urbanites residing in Almaty (ibid.: 669). In their turn, the coping strategies of rurals in Almaty were defensive when they tried to take pride in their 'authentic' Kazakh identity, saying, '"I am rural, no matter how long I stay in the city, I will be rural"' (Yessenova.: 671). Such responses were subsequently recognized and accepted by the urbanites, since the village stands also for autochthonous Kazakhness where the 'pure Kazakh traditions' are kept alive (ibid.: 665). As a result, Russophone Kazakhs developed ambivalent attitudes towards the *aul* (village), regarding it as backward in comparison to cities but also as an 'authentic Kazakh space.' As will be shown, this process is changing in the context of Astana's urban space, which is developing as a 'Kazakh space' due to the nation-building project and the processes related to it. In Astana, this is entangled with previous divisions, which produces complexities

and multiple identifications. In the end, Astana allows 'authentic Kazakhness' to develop in an urban space as well.

The rural influx has generated fears of *ruralization* on the part of long-term city dwellers in other post-Soviet cities, too, as these saw reversed the achievements of the socialist cities and modernity at large (Alexander and Buchli 2007; Darieva et al. 2011). In Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan's capital, Schröder (2010) discusses the meaning of the derogatory label *myrk* used by urbanites to describe the villager newcomers and their 'uncivilized' nature that plays out in forms of dress, behavior, and language. When it comes to discriminating against their villager co-ethnics, Kyrgyz, long-term Bishkek dwellers have aligned themselves with Russian urbanites. Flynn and Kosmarskaya (2012) also discuss the negative perceptions of newcomers and the antagonistic discourse by long-term Bishkek residents regarding rural migrants. Flynn and Kosmarskaya argue that the 'lack of culture' associated with southerners and their comparison to minority Uzbeks remain part of larger concerns about the loss of Soviet urban order, which accompanies broader post-Soviet socioeconomic restructuring (ibid.: 453-454).

On the whole, concerns about ruralization are present in Astana as well. However, the drastic population growth has turned the local population into a minority, which decreases their authority and leverage over newcomers. So the situation is different in Astana, where every other person is a *priezzhiy*. Among these, state bureaucrats who had to relocate from Almaty make up rather a small share of the new arrivals, while the rest have moved there voluntarily. Newcomers from the former capital Almaty are estimated to constitute a third of the population of Astana (Zabirova 2002: 215). Migrants coming from Southern Kazakhstan oblast or Chymkent oblast also ranked high in Astana (ibid.). Others have come from northern oblasts like Karaganda, Qostanay, and Petropavlovsk. Most newcomers are young and of working age: those age 15–24 comprised a third of the newcomers and another 40% were between 25 and 39 years old in the early 2000s (Tatibekov 2005: 58 cited in Laszczkowski

2012: 85). From the mid-2000s, more newcomers from the countryside and small towns arrived due to increased demand for low-skilled labor in the construction sector. Thus, Astana attracted the most contrasting and diverse people, from the most highly professional group to unskilled or semi-skilled manual workers ready to take up any work available. This also meant that people who had previously been distant came to interact with each other on a regular basis. Still, rural *priezzhie* are discriminated against in Astana, derogatively called *sel'skie* [villagers], *mambet* [uncultured], or *yuzhane* [Southerners] in contrast to the urbanites and northerners who are seen as more 'cultured,' urban, and 'civilized.' Nonetheless, due to their numbers and diversity, the *priezzhie* are actively redefining all these old collective identifications in the new urban context.

Regional identities have developed as significant demarcations along with ethno-national identities. At present the 'north' refers to the northern, generally Russian-dominated territories of Kazakhstan, whose everyday life and culture is distinctly different from the 'south,' that is, regions like Chymkent, Kyzylorda, or Taraz which are close to the borders of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. In the 'south,' a 'traditional,' meaning 'Kazakh' mode of life, dominated everyday life, as opposed to a Russian/Soviet lifestyle, or a 'northern' one in general. Historically, the so-called Northerners, and Russophone Kazakhs living in Russian-dominated northern but also other regions of Kazakhstan, felt partly separated from the rest of the Kazakhstan (Dave 2007). The regional 'north vs. south' division crisscrosses the 'urban-rural' continuum where Southerners are often seen as automatically rural while Northerners pass as urban.

Alima: From Being a Northerner to Almost Turning into a Local Astanaian

Alima is a typical *priezzhiy*, a 28-year-old Kazakh woman from Karaganda (the nearest big mining city) who had come to Astana three years before the time of our encounter in 2010. I came to know her as my roommate when she moved into our shared apartment shortly after me. For Alima, the decision to move to Astana in 2007 was personal as well as

work related. In her hometown, she was happy to work at a bank, a position which she had obtained in a merit-based selection process, she told me. She worked for the department of loans for small and medium-size businesses. But when her boyfriend moved to Astana from Karaganda, she asked to be transferred to Astana, too. Alima was transferred to one of the Astana branches of her bank and she worked there for a year and a half. Her salary was more than US$500, which made her happy as it was above the average salary in Astana at that time. The stability of her work was, however, short-lived. During the financial crisis which hit Kazakhstan's banking sector, Alima was laid off at the end of 2008. She then was unemployed for more than a year, during which she stayed in Astana. The bank had paid her severance pay equal to two monthly salaries. She lived on this compensation money for some time and did not register at the unemployment agency to receive unemployment benefits because she had no Astana registration and the benefits were very little. Alima paid private employment agencies to find her work but this was in vain. There were many former bank employees who were laid off during the financial crisis. Alima's private life also suffered. Her boyfriend broke up with her soon after her arrival in Astana. He worked for DPS [*Dorozhno-patrul'naya Sluzhba*] (Traffic Police) and was busy meeting other women in the city. In the summer of 2010, Alima found a part-time job at a travel agency owned by a friend. Her salary was small and she often complained that it was barely enough to cover accommodation and basic expenses. Indeed, her share of the rent, 14,000 Tenge (US$100), of our apartment was too high for her.

I met Alima at this low point of her life in Astana, when she had no proper job and no boyfriend or relatives upon whom she could rely. Living in our crowded apartment, she was at times bitter about her single life, as well as her precarious financial situation. It was a hard blow after her enthusiasm and accomplishments at work which she enjoyed during her initial years in Astana. Yet, despite all the hardships, she refused to leave Astana because she believed her situation would improve in the near future and because she no longer identified

herself with her native town. Alima said, “But I really did not know what to expect when I came here. That’s why I can’t say that I am disappointed. It was rather to see how it goes.” Still, she admitted that she had thought it would be good for her career to move to the new capital, which was not far from her native town, because many young people like herself did so. It was a risk she took and she was ready to accept the challenges she encountered in the new city. Meanwhile, her hometown was relegated to her past, while Astana was definitely connected to her future. But at the time, she had not yet achieved this desired future life. Alima accepted her present situation as a temporary phase.

Coming from northern Kazakhstan, Alima was Russified in terms of language: she spoke Russian and had only some basic understanding of Kazakh. At home, Alima watched Russian TV channels and listened to Russian songs like my other roommates. The language spoken in our shared apartment was also Russian. Only on rare occasions did my roommates, who were mostly from the northern towns, speak Kazakh with each other and it was always mixed with Russian. Their favorite television shows were broadcast in Russian: there, they learned about the latest trends in fashion, music, and dating culture. They would also read fashion magazines and novels in Russian.

In Astana, Alima directly interacted with many Southerners when she took private computer classes, hoping to increase her chances on the job market. When the course finished and everyone received their certificates, her group-mates from the south asked, “Aren’t we going to make presents to our teachers and set up a table with wine and food to properly thank them?!” Alima claimed that in the Southerners’ ‘mentality,’ it is not enough just to follow the rules, meaning they want to evade rules or think of extra or additional ways to deal with the given situation. Alima and her northern group-mates were against the extra costs for gifts and thought that paying the required fee for the private course was more than sufficient. Such differences in approach linked to regional customs and modes sometimes brought about misunderstanding and reinforced negative regional stereotypes.

Moreover, Alima claimed that Astana's leading government positions were all taken up by Southerners, who were less competent and who were more likely to engage in corrupt practices, as opposed to Northerners like herself. In addition, Southerners themselves often bragged about their connections, thus confirming the negative perception of others. Alima considered it unfair that Southerners enriched themselves through corruption and her dire financial situation at that moment contributed to her resentments against them. The success of many Southerners led Alima, like many Northerners, to develop negative attitudes toward them since these people seemed to know to 'get what they wanted.' This contributed to a feeling of intense competition among newcomers, as Alima summed up:

> Since Astana is a city of *priezzhie*, people are very pragmatic here. Here everyone is trying to make a career so they are fighting for survival. One is trying to find one's place. People think more about their future here. It is not easy here. That's why people have to try harder to succeed. If you can't manage, then you suffer. [Pause] *Priezzhie* are all united in their desire to live in the capital and find a well-paid stable job. People want to earn money here.

Regional categories of collective identification are re-established when competition is intensified and resources are seen as unfairly distributed. In this light, Alima perceived her own position as culturally superior, but economically inferior to those of her southern competitors.

In contrast to competitive *priezzhie,* the natives of Tselinograd are by many people perceived as lagging behind the changes and missing opportunities which had been absent before. Still, Alima somehow sympathizes with native locals because they feel lost in the new capital and because Alima partly shares their feeling of being marginalized:

> It was a small provincial town before. And the locals have such provincial values and views and I think they simply can't catch up with the fast-paced modern [*sovremennyi*] rhythm of life here. [Pause] In other cities where the majority of people are natives, there are certain established values. There are places where people respect themselves and are proud of their history. But here in Astana since it is a city of *priezzhie,* people do not have such shared values. All they love is their new apartments and jobs!

In the beginning, Alima thought Astana was 'cold and empty' and only just developing into a modern city. The only thing she was happy about was her job. Feeling all alone in a new city, she was initially scared and insecure and considered Southerners as outsiders. However, she quickly adjusted and got to know the city well. She met other *priezzhie* from different regions and backgrounds, who found themselves in similar conditions and had to find their own place. Although each *priezzhiy* proudly asserts his or her place of origin for a while after their arrival in Astana, with time they no longer attach much importance to these identities and become *priezzhie* like everyone else, "You know, generally those who come to Astana are not ashamed to say where they originally come from. Yes, it is normal. Everyone is a *priezzhiy* here after all. However, those who have lived here more than a year or so consider themselves to be almost locals [*mestnyi*] like me." In this way, Alima as a *priezzhiy* resembles a liminal personae as Turner (2008 [1969]: 95) describes the process of status transformation.

To legitimize and further establish her new identity, Alima expressed strong attachment and loyalty to Astana:

> If I compare Karaganda to Astana, I consider Astana my city. Yes, Astana is mine and in Karaganda I feel like a stranger. I go there as a guest. [Pause] You mean, if I care for Astana? For its future? I sure do! It is important for me because I consider it my city. I connect my future with this city. I do not want to go back to Karaganda. Yes, I want to get married here and stay in Astana. I love Astana, it's my city!

Alima creates distance from her northern identity, while claiming to have become a local Astana resident. The return to her hometown is no longer an option for her as she sees her future in Astana. From the point of view of natives of Tselinograd and more successful *priezzhie*, e.g., former Almaty residents, Alima might not quite qualify for the title of Astanaian. Alima's transition is not yet complete. In order to compensate this lack of approval Alima overidentifies herself with Astana. In this sense, Alima's hopes lie with Astana. Even if she has no job and no money, she believes Astana will bring salvation to her hardships eventually, and this also makes her an Astanaian.

Despite discursive regional animosities, the everyday life of many *priezzhie* was mixed rather than divided. In our shared apartment, Alima lived and got along with *priezzhie* who came from all over Kazakhstan. During the three months of my stay, our home included a Kyrgyz (me), a Russian, a Tatar, and three Kazakhs: from Taraz (south), Aktau (west) and a native local (pre-capital resident). This micro-climate of our apartment reflected the diversity of the *priezzhie* of Astana. Beyond this, Alima, while generally not fond of southern men had already dated young men from the 'south' and even considered them more romantic.

At the end, Alima calls all newcomers *priezzhie*, but emphasizes existing regional divides. She doubts the competence and professionalism of southern newcomers, which she attributes to regional difference, but this does not hinder her from identifying them as *priezzhie*. As a *priezzhiy*, Alima found herself in a liminal position between being still a Northerner and, at the same time, a local Astanaian. Depending on context, Alima emphasizes being a Northerner, a *priezzhiy*, or a local Astanaian. She felt in-between, sharing some attributes of Northerners, as well as some of locals. Her frequent reference to *priezzhie* in terms of shared experiences reflects her own status transformation. For Alima, a change in self-perception seems to have been the most crucial element in her transformation towards becoming Astanaian.

Arsen: Between Proud Southerner and *Priezzhiy*

Arsen, a 28-year-old Kazakh man, came to Astana to study in 2002 at the Eurasian University from the southern small town, Merke, on the border with Kyrgyzstan. His parents sent him to study in the new capital against his own wish to study in Almaty. He did not have any relatives in Astana and did not like the city, since his friends had mostly gone to Almaty to study. Later on, he got used to Astana, as it started to change radically. Arsen made new friends at university, who were also *priezzhie* and came from all over Kazakhstan. After finishing his studies, Arsen was promised a lucrative job in Astana by a distant relative and friend of his family. Relying on this connection, Arsen did not make any personal effort to

find employment. He got a job at the Kazakhstan Railway Company through that contact, but did not like it and, on top of everything, his work was poorly paid. Unsatisfied with his position, Arsen then searched for other options and applied to work in banks. After successfully passing a set of recruitment exams, he was employed by one of the best banks in Astana. He proudly recounted how he managed to be one out of fifteen final candidates selected from more than one hundred applicants. Arsen concluded, "I will never rely on anyone anymore, only on my own efforts." Enjoying his personal success, he felt he managed to conquer the "city of the future." After living in Astana for seven years, he was very happy to be there and seemed to feel at home even more than Alima did. Most importantly, he was able to realize his dream and still keep striving for more:

> I am satisfied with my life here. Astana is clean; salaries are high, well at least in the banking sector. It was my dream to work at the bank and so my dream has come true. But now because of the crisis, they are cutting down salaries and reducing staff. I get paid less now than two years ago but I do twice as much work. So I am thinking now of changing my job.

This is exactly the kind of behavior and mindset Northerners would describe as 'cunning.' Arsen is an example of a Southerner, who did not just rely on his pre-existing networks, but took active steps to improve his situation. However, his attitude of being overly flexible and using different strategies was looked upon with contempt and negatively by Northerners like Alima. In Astana, the boundaries of kin and the old mechanisms of mutual support are weakened; kin-based support is not reliable. Both Arsen and Alima found jobs at banks through meritocratic selection, eventually, after passing tests.

In return, Arsen viewed both local natives and Northerners as 'small' and weak, while ethnic Kazakhs like him were 'poor victims.' The local natives were generally 'friendly,' he observed with a sympathetic voice. Being friendly and nice, however, were not qualities needed to succeed in Astana, as it is a city for the young and ambitious, where one has to be dynamic and ready to face challenges. Arsen tries to demonstrate this superiority in

comparison to locals and Northerners. When I asked him what he thought of the locals in Astana, and their attitude towards *priezzhie*, he said:

> Locals, here in the north – well, in comparison to Southerners, they are simple. Yes, I don't know, maybe because the Russians were putting down the local Kazakhs, dominating them. The local Kazakhs told me so. Then, from 1998, the Southerners started coming here, as well as people from other regions. By the way, you know what surprised me the most when I came here: practically no one spoke Kazakh. Everyone spoke only Russian.

Arsen was not outraged when he told me that Russians had treated Kazakhs poorly, but rather mentioned it as a simple fact of past dominance. He implied that local Kazakhs were humble, having had to suffer from chauvinistic attitudes at the hands of Russians, and they gave up their language to please Russians. Ethnic Kazakhs like him were 'poor victims.' His tone suggested that this ethnic 'injustice' was set right after the arrival of Kazakhs from other regions, who now 'rightly' dominated the city. Here, the wide acceptance of a post-colonial discourse, in which the state needs to protect the core nation and redress the previous oppression suffered by Kazakhs, is evident (Brubaker 2011: 1786). Arsen thought President Nazarbayev's decision to move the capital, thus bringing more Kazakhs to the north where Russians had outnumbered Kazakhs, and avoiding the danger of Russia incorporating this region of the country, was correct. These fears have been become part of the nationalizing process.

Arsen further accused the northern Kazakhs of forgetting their language and thus becoming *chala*-Kazakh (half-Kazakh), a term which Kazakh nationalists, and villagers more generally, use to describe urban Kazakhs who are ignorant of their culture and roots (Nazpary 2002: 169-171). The 'true Kazakhs' revoke romanticist ideas about the countryside as being the 'cradle' of Kazakh culture and preserving the 'authentic' Kazakh traditions (Yessenova 2005). Arsen proudly stated that he speaks very good Kazakh, since he comes from south; at university in Astana, he studied in the Kazakh language. The changing and transforming context of the new capital does not challenge his 'authentic' Kazakhness. The Kazakh

language and ethnic Kazakhs are seen as 'naturally' belonging to the new capital's urban context in independent Kazakhstan. Now that the status and prestige of the Kazakh language has been elevated and has become even a 'must' for government workers, it is a sign of prestige. Many urban Kazakhstanis have accepted such claims as legitimate and acknowledge the benefits of Kazakh language skills to one's career aspirations. Speaking only Russian is now looked down as a deficiency for many Kazakhstanis, regardless of place of origin or ethnic affiliation, while speaking only Kazakh can be regarded as a patriotic act. This gives Southerners with good Kazakh skills leverage over Russophone, urban Kazakhs when asserting that they belong in the new capital of independent Kazakhstan. In the meantime, Russian language and culture have been degraded to a secondary position.

Nonetheless, Arsen was well aware that villagers and Southerners like him were disliked by urban locals and by Northerners. Speaking Russian still remains important for Southern *priezzhie* to fit into the urban setting and prove a sufficient degree of urbanity. Rurals, like Arsen, try to become more urbanized in order to avoid stigmatization by urbanites. They learn appropriate urban behavior, appearance, and particularly improve their Russian language skills. Arsen never said that locals discriminated against him, but, he preferred to give the interview in Russian all the same. I interpret this as attempt on his part to prove that he is urbanized. He did include a few Kazakh expressions while talking to me. He mentioned his Kazakh skills to demonstrate that he was an 'authentic' Kazakh, in contrast to the Russian-speaking northern Kazakhs who conversed mostly in Russian, like, for example, Alima. In contrast to Alima, Arsen had the choice of two languages and used them as he saw fit. Most importantly, his Kazakh skills were not decisive for being employed at the Railway Company and his job at the bank was acquired as a result of other competences. Arsen said that, among his friends, Russian as well as Kazakh was spoken. Thus, in practice his Kazakh skills were an added value at best, but they played a symbolic role. In addition, using the Russian word *priezzhie* to designate the newcomers is revealing of the continuing dominance

of the Russian language in everyday life. Those who preferred to give me interviews in Kazakh used the Russian word *priezzhie* exactly as those who did not. Furthermore, the *oralman*, ethnic Kazakh repatriates from Mongolia and China, in Astana are stigmatized for lack of Russian skills. Hence, being proud of their 'authentic' origins and Kazakh language skills, rural *priezzhie* asserted their presence in Astana, but in the process adopted an urban attitude all the same. Arsen is faced with contradictory challenges in his identity formation. While presenting himself as a Kazakh-speaking patriot, he still had to adopt an urban style, which, along with changing his behavior and even the way he dresses, includes speaking Russian.

At the end, Arsen categorizes all newcomers as *priezzhie* like himself, who adjust and accommodate themselves to the futuristic capital. Being a *priezzhiy* is a solution to the contradictions he faces to be urban enough, while simultaneously staying an 'authentic' Kazakh, "I finished university here and made many friends. My friends here come from all over Kazakhstan. Here at least 70% of the population are *priezzhie* like me. When you meet someone, you can be sure that he or she is a *priezzhiy*. There are so few locals here." Unlike Alima, Arsen does not rush to become a local Astanaian and but seems to identify as a *priezzhiy*, like his friends. For Arsen, 'locals' are not the new Astanaians, but the natives of old Tselinograd. He boasted that he had many friends and acquaintances from different regions and that he could use these contacts any time, if he needed help. The information about his friends' diverse background is important as it signifies his own successful urban socialization in Astana. Arsen does not limit his friends to people from the south, but has won acceptance and recognition from Northerners and urbanites too. What seemed even more important than his friends' background was their achievements. Many of Arsen's friends were apparently also successful, he said, each one owned a Jeep, an American brand, which is a status symbol in Kazakhstan. He valued their entrepreneurial spirit and admired them for using the opportunities the city offered. He told me an Astana joke, "A new Kazakh is

someone who has a brand new apartment on the Left Bank and a Jeep." He meant that his friends cared only about becoming 'a new Kazakh' and not about regional differences. Such material aspirations were widely shared and were not limited either to 'cultured' urbanites or Southern rurals. Obtaining a new apartment was the dream of every newcomer to Astana, as will be discussed in Chapter 3.

Although Arsen spent his childhood far from Astana, it is there that he became an adult. Like Alima, Arsen wants to stay in Astana, "I like living in Astana. It is my city, my place. When I go to my hometown, I hardly recognize people there. Some people greet me but I don't recognize them anymore. My old friends have moved to some other place. I want to stay in Astana. I don't want to go anywhere else. Only in Astana!" To summarize, I want to point out once more the unconventional and surprising coping strategies of people like Arsen. Although Arsen has lived in Astana longer than most other *priezzhie* I met, he does not feel confident enough to claim he is an Astanaian, only enough to qualify as a successful *priezzhiy*. He is a proud Southerner, in contrast to Russified Northerners, but also a *priezzhiy* first, by having obtained a job through his personal effort, which proves his competence, and secondly, by widening his network of friends and acquaintances. Northerners and urbanites cannot accuse him though being a Southerner, i.e., of corruption or kin-based nepotism because, at the end, he relied solely on his own efforts. His status as a successful *priezzhiy* is hence unchallenged, while Alima, as an urbanite and Northerner, did not have to prove her *priezzhiy* status in the first place. Alima did not mention other *priezzhie* accepting her status as an Astanaian, while for Arsen it seems crucial that his friends accept him as a successful *priezzhiy*. Rural *priezzhie* like Arsen, first struggle to become urban *priezzhie* in order to be recognized as fit for an urban environment before they can claim the status of a fully-fledged Astana resident. In this process, Arsen's southern identity and Kazakh-language competence turned out to be an additional asset, since they granted him more flexibility and social capital to obtain success in life.

Elena: Unable to Move

Elena, a Russian retiree, was relocated from Almaty when she was working for the Supreme Court and the Constitutional Committee of Kazakhstan in 1998. It was her second year of retirement when I met her in 2009. She was sixty-two years old at that time. It had already been 11 years since she had moved to Astana. She identified herself as a former Almaty resident, like her colleagues who had all been re-settled to Astana as pioneers to build the new capital. In 1998, Elena's office was still on the Right Bank, in the old town, but shortly afterwards construction of their brand-new shining office was finished in the Left Bank. Elena worked 45 years in high level government positions altogether: she started her career in Soviet times and then worked almost two decades during the independence period. Elena is not originally from Almaty. She was born 120 kilometers away from Astana in the Astrakhan Region, where her parents lived and are now buried. Right after finishing high school, she moved to Almaty where she attended university and stayed after getting married. She said that in moving to Astana, she was 'returning' to the 'north,' her home, where she was now closer to her remaining relatives. As a formerly high-ranking Supreme Court employee, Elena belonged to the administrative political elite of Kazakhstan and was valued for her professional skills. She witnessed how the new capital was 'born' and was proud of having devoted herself to working and actively participating in the making of Astana:

> Yes, my expectations were fully met. My skills were needed. I was in demand. I got a new apartment. Everything was going great. Most of my colleagues were also people relocated from Almaty and we all worked hard, and later on natives and other *priezzhie* joined our team here. We were doing the same job and our work united us all. There were no divisions between natives and *priezzhie.* People were coming to this city from different regions.

Unsurprisingly, former Almaty residents were professionals; they were ambitious and occupied many of the lucrative state-paid positions in the new capital. Out of all *priezzhie*, they enjoy the highest status. Highly professional and successful, they are a distinctive group and they enjoyed a number of privileges as pioneer settlers, for example, subsidized housing

and high wages. After her arrival, Elena was given keys to her brand-new, subsidized apartment built especially for redeployed government officials in Astana. These first new apartments were located in the prestigious area of *Mikrorayon Samal* along the riverbank promenade. Elena was able to buy her apartment within only five years. As the new administrative center of Kazakhstan, Astana is a city of *chinovniki*, i.e., middle- and high-ranking government workers.

In the pool of *priezzhie* who have gained outside recognition and whose new Astanaian status is no longer questioned are former Almaty residents, mostly government workers and their families who were transferred. In general, early newcomers from Almaty, according to my fieldwork observations, felt superior to the *priezzhie* who arrived in Astana only recently, after the initial hard years were over. I saw them behave arrogantly towards natives and other newcomers. Regarding other *priezzhie* and natives, Elena was inclusive of everyone, but still referred to natives in a somewhat patronizing tone as 'simple and harmless,' claiming that they should be extremely happy and grateful to have become the residents of the new capital. Laszczkowski, when describing one such 'pioneer,' shows how unimpressed these people were with the town's provincial habits – according to that person's perception, the quality of service was low; there were very few places to go out and socialize; and they perceived a lack of cosmopolitan manners (2012: 88-89). Moreover, they reduced the pre-capital population to 'relics' of the past, who were alienated from new Astana and from the discourse of the "city of the future" (Laszczkowski 2012: 89-90). They had to be taught specific skills to meet the demands and standards of the more sophisticated culture of *Almatintsy*. On the last place, the *Almatintsy* would place struggling, ill-adapted, rural newcomers. These lacked any urban socialization and Astana was overburdened with 'civilizing' them (ibid.: 88). *Almatintsy* define Astanaians as people who are 'definitely *priezzhie*,' hardworking, self-reliant and striving towards personal, as well as material, growth (ibid.: 88-89). These findings were generally confirmed by my research. As successful

priezzhie, most former Almaty residents, in their own perception and in the eyes of others, not only experienced a smooth transformation into Astanaians, but themselves set the standards for and imposed their ideas about how a successful Astanaian should be. *Almatintsy* discriminated against rurals as ill-fitted to Astana's urban life and, in this way, effectively reproduced the urban-rural divide.

Unlike many of her counterparts from Almaty, Elena was unable to maintain her position as a privileged, redeployed *priezzhiy* due to nationalistic policies and practices. Elena's ethnic belonging and language competence were put to the test in Astana for the first time, while in Almaty she did not encounter any problems. Not everything turned out to be as great in Astana as she had enthusiastically described in the beginning of her interview with me. To her, the 'Russian question' proved to be very sensitive. Elena, who expressed her admiration for Astana and told how happy she was with her life and her job at the Supreme Court, only spoke very carefully about her issue with the Kazakh language. Her new colleagues were all nice and she got along with them well and this is what she talked about. Only when I said that now ethnic Kazakhs dominate the city as opposed to Russians did she find it appropriate to talk about the issue, and said:

> Well, you know, I should tell you this is a very delicate question; of course, I understand it. [Pause] Not easy at all. But I will give you my own opinion. Shortly before retirement, I understood it was my time to leave because it was very hard for me to continue working, very hard. The documentation started coming in the state language [Kazakh] only, and I had to go through all of it. And here I started to experience big difficulties and incompetence. I did not feel competent anymore. This I did not like at all. Because having devoted all my life to working for my government, having received rewards and recognition for my hard work and contributions, I felt a bit unfairly [*ushem'lenno*] treated at the end. But this is normal! One needs to start at some point!

I noticed how uncomfortable she became while speaking, almost ashamed to admit her feelings were hurt. She never used words like 'discrimination' or 'exclusion.' Instead, she talked about 'being a bit unfairly treated,' which sounds soft, and invited me to sympathize with her. Presenting herself as modest and self-restrained, she would not allow herself to

express her hurt feelings freely or even recognize them as legitimate. The language shift from Russian to Kazakh marks a contextual change in administration. The new rule demanded a switch of all documentation into the new state language. The Supreme Court of Kazakhstan, the Central Election Commission, the National Security Committee, and other government offices started changing their documentation to the state language in 2008 (Aminov et al. 2010: 9-14). Until that time, documents were being written in both languages, Russian and Kazakh. Elena left her job voluntarily in 2007. By 2010, all documentation generated by the administration was to be issued only in the state language, and the transactions of ministries, normative legal acts, and the like were all to be written in Kazakh with translations into 'other languages' (read Russian). Hence, Elena's retirement was an exit solution in the face of a language barrier.

For the rest of our conversation, Elena's tone remained soft and constrained; and when there was a taint of criticism, she made sure to also say something positive about the government, or find some justification like "it is a normal [*normal'nyi*] thing to happen." But still, the Russian elites seemed poorly prepared to adapt to the linguistic 'Kazakhization' of the government administration. Elena said:[6]

> Given my age, I knew I could not master Kazakh and I suffered a little bit because of this barrier. I suffered a lot because of it. I suffered a lot! Because even the nameplates for offices were changed and I could not find the right departments at work. [Pause] But the fact that now more Kazakh was spoken at work was normal for me. In the past, only Russian was spoken, which was not normal either [sic]. I am telling you, this was not right! Still, by some of my Kazakh colleagues I felt hurt on purpose. Not many, but some did it [i.e., excluded me] to hurt me, we still respect each other. I see that this process was a normal thing to happen, but inside I felt very anxious.

This statement is striking because it shows how Russians experiencing exclusion at work had no adequate means to express themselves or to complain about it. While first trying to downplay her suffering, Elena finally admits that even nameplate changes caused her big

[6] The following and other passages indicating direct quotations from my informants have actually been somewhat rearranged in order to make the texts more consistent; wording is at times slightly condensed while the original meaning is retained.

problems. She seems to be fully accepting that the Kazakh language deserves more support, but, at the same time, she feels unfairly excluded. At the end, she does not seem to know how to reconcile the two feelings. I had the impression that Elena was being her own judge now; she was on the 'loser' side and felt that she had to accept the changes, despite coping badly with the consequences.

Ten years before, Elena was strongly motivated to learn Kazakh. Nonetheless, mastering it actually proved harder than she had imagined. Although she attended mandatory Kazakh courses for state workers together with her Russian-speaking Kazakh colleagues, Elena did not learn to speak the language due to "poor teaching methods and lack of motivation," as she put it. The whole process was not very effective. She tried to practice her Kazakh, but her Kazakh colleagues continued to converse with her in Russian. Only a few people took these courses seriously anyway, while the use of Russian language at work largely continued. Kazakhs were now conversing in Kazakh with each other more, but no one actually started writing official letters in Kazakh, Elena concluded. As other studies also show, not enough effort was made to get Russians to learn the Kazakh language in practice up to present (Brubaker 2011). It has been stated that mastering Kazakh became the duty of every citizen, while the state invested only a little money or no real effort in facilitating the actual process (Masalimova 2010 cited in Lazsczkowki 2012: 78). Elena expressed surprise that studying Kazakh yielded so little in terms of results; some of her friends who moved to the U.S. had learned English very fast, after all. English was becoming popular in Kazakhstan, too. In fact, the government workers were now given an additional task: to learn English. In 2010, at the Education Ministry the documents were generated in Kazakh and in English only. In these recent efforts, the government was trying to promote English at the expense of Russian. The Kazakhstani elite now send their children not to Russian universities, but to European and American colleges. In short, Elena and her Russian speaking, Kazakh co-workers learned the Kazakh language poorly during the transition period and thus were ill-

prepared for the actual language shift; all this, despite the smooth transition envisioned by the state.

Elena also stated it was partly Russians' fault that Russians did not learn Kazakh: why did they so readily give in to Russian language? At this point, she became defensive, treating Russians and Kazakhs alike as victims of Soviet times, all discouraged from learning the titular language, "But we, the Russians, are of course – are completely ignorant in Kazakh. It is a pity! What can you do? We lived such a life; it was like that. That's why we [Russians] feel uncomfortable. But now [after retirement] I don't feel any of this [discomfort] anymore, of course." Rejecting the 'colonizer' discourse, Elena appeals to the Soviet socialization she shares with urban Kazakhs, who became Russified and urbanized. She said that in government jobs, Russians faced language difficulties, but this was the case with her Kazakh co-workers as well, who could speak basic Kazakh, but could barely issue an official document. There is one contrast between Elena and her Kazakh colleagues, though: the latter still hung on to their positions. Elena did not mention any of her Kazakh colleagues as being forced to leave, or quitting their jobs of their own accord. Many of them seem to continue to rely on translators and thus managed their paperwork. Russians have become easy targets for language-based exclusion by Kazakhs, although many of the latter are actually in a similar situation in terms of ignorance of Kazakh language. Elena cannot find an adequate framework for expressing her suffering. Being the victim of unjustified exclusion, as it were, she avoids taking the role of a prosecutor or an accuser, but must explain her position within the existing dominant discourse concerning the primacy of the titular nation and its language. As such, Elena's narrative attests to Kazakhstan's successful realization of a nationalist discourse, in which no other, viable alternatives have gained ground since independence. Hence, Elena's sufferings do not channel into criticism of state policies.

Meanwhile, the younger Russian generation has been denied entry to comparable government positions altogether. The significance of informal rules which manifest in

selection through networks, rather than by merit and qualifications has further undermined trust in formal rules, which implies the demand of Kazakh skills for state jobs. Elena referred to the situation of her son, "My son likes Astana very much, just like me, but he has a hard time finding suitable work. It is very difficult for him to find a job. Maybe because of [the financial] crisis or [because of his] lack of Kazakh skills. And you know that the business sector is not 'clean' either. Someone has to help you out in any case." Russians are not necessarily discriminated against due to their ethnicity or language incompetence. They also simply lack the necessary connections. Elena's son was unemployed at that moment, although he had two degrees: one in medicine and the other in finance. Elena said it was because her son was honest and professional, but at that time these qualities mattered less than having the right connections. In this vein, Elena's son feels excluded as many ordinary Kazakhs without connections do. Consequently, many Russians feel it is not enough to learn the Kazakh language in order to be treated equally or integrated. Formal rules applied only selectively and other factors played a role as well. If the formal rules had been strictly applied to everyone, these would have created an incentive for the younger Russian generation to, in their turn, play by the rules.

Elena, like many Kazakhs at the time, enthusiastically supported the modernization discourse of Nazarbayev. During my research, this attitude would often manifest in praising Astana as Nazarbayev's greatest achievement. Indeed, her identity as a former government worker played a major role in this, as she defended the government and demonstrated her loyalty. Elena agreed with the official arguments in favor of moving the capital and said that personally she was very happy and thought the correct location was chosen. She was used to regularly reading the government-controlled newspapers and after retirement she remained loyal to *Habar,* the state news channel, to stay informed. *Habar* transmitted in two languages: first Kazakh and then Russian. The recent development of more television channels in Kazakh language was a "good thing," Elena added. Her only critical comment about *Habar* was that

the presidential party *Nur Otan* got more attention than other parties. As for alternative views and news, Elena said she rarely read them because:

> They are very critical. I don't remember which ones. But when you start reading about how bad everything is, it overwhelms you…overwhelms because they do not see how many positive things are done at the same time, how many good things are achieved. [Pause] One needs to support people and not discourage them. And when you read such things you just want to close your eyes and jump into this Ishim River and never come out. [Laughs.] Life is hard anyway, especially for pensioners, very hard. So why depress them even more!?

As a pensioner, Elena stated that her salary was just about enough to cover her basic needs in Astana. She was lucky that did not have to pay for the rent; she would not have been able to pay for the rent with her pension income alone. Still, for Elena, the government was doing its best, struggling with the aftermath of the financial crisis. She found it hard to identify with any of the opposition newspapers. She viewed them as unprofessional and lacking constructive criticism.

Elena's relocation to Astana to help create the new capital was part of her meaningful inclusion in Kazakhstan's modernization efforts. She admired how Astana had changed and what it offered:

> There are so many opportunities here. Just look at all the construction going on in this city! It is all changing before your eyes, this architectural ensemble, unrivaled and unique. I have fallen in love with Astana over and over again. They are building houses, and state employees have a chance to receive subsidized housing. And of course, it is beautiful here. Everyone must like it here. It is a miracle! I love Astana very much! Look at our official holidays, all these happy people gathering, and everything is beautiful and shiny with fireworks. All of this is done for the people, for our nation! And Astana Day is our favorite holiday, of course! Music is everywhere and the fireworks rise above the water! Wow! How can anyone dislike that!? That's why everyone loves it, and they must like it! And look at this architecture here in Astana; it is just a miracle!

Importantly, for Kazakhstani Russians such as Elena, Nazarbayev was also a strong leader who maintained inter-ethnic peace. The official discourse of 'inter-ethnic harmony' as one of

the major achievements of the wise 'Leader of the Nation' proved highly effective.[7] But it also meant that within the Astana project and the rhetoric of inclusive 'Eurasian' civic identity there was no room for a critical assessment of 'ethnic harmony.' They complement each other because Astana's 'Eurasian look.' Moreover, the arrival of people from different national groups was presented as a proof of the successful implementation of 'ethnic harmony.' Hence, the success of this harmony is not open to question. It is presented as already achieved. The problem is considered solved even before having been discussed. Attention is diverted from actual inter-ethnic issues towards the 'proof' of hospitality of the nation in the words of the president. "In a nutshell, Astana is the embodiment of the tolerance of our people, their embrace of other civilizations. Various styles and epochs are harmoniously combined in the architecture of the city" (Nazarbayev 2010: 53, cited in Koch 2012: 160). Beyond this, after experiencing discrimination in the Baltic states during a visit there in the late 1990s, Elena felt safe and protected in Kazakhstan. The tragic clashes between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz in the southern part of Kyrgyzstan in 2010 convinced Elena that her situation and the situation of all Russians in Kazakhstan was better than in neighboring countries. Russians placed their trust in Nazarbayev rather than the state, since he personified the guarantee that 'inter-ethnic harmony' will persist.

Elena, like many of my Russian respondents, did not refer to her Kazakhstan citizenship as a status that should guarantee her equal rights or protection from discrimination. I find Elena's stance even more astonishing because, although she was a judge, she did not even as much as mention Kazakhstan's laws promoting the equality of all ethnic groups. Citizenship was deemed insufficient for the protection of an individual's rights. Alternatively, it is the narrative of 'homeland' with which Russians try to justify their right to belong to

[7] Especially at the onset of Kazakhstan's OSCE chairmanship in 2010, inter-ethnic peace as a base for a stable state and a growing, dynamic economy contributing to the whole region's stability, was strongly promoted in Kazakhstan's mass media.

Kazakhstan. They appealed to 'birth right' and sense of rootedness in the given territory. This finds expression in Elena's rhetoric about 'roots':

> Times are not easy but we are not thinking about leaving. And I pray to God that such thoughts never occur because this is the homeland of my ancestors. My grandfather arrived here in 19th century, and my father was born here in *Stepnoe* Village in 1925, not far from Astana. That's why it would be painful to leave this place because our roots are very deep here. Very deep!

And yet, homeland claims like Elena's are potentially problematic since they contradict Kazakhstan's official interpretation of history, which claims that the present borders correspond to the historical habitat of the Kazakhs. The reconstruction of local shrines and the encouragement of pilgrimages to them is an attempt to firmly 'root' Kazakh history and culture in the territory and goes hand in hand with a wider repatriation policy directed towards Kazakh diasporas (Dubuisson 2011: 469; Lacaze 2010: 171; Mendikulova 2010: 154). Elena said that Kazakhstan's closeness to Russia was a destiny, which ties these two countries with their huge territories together; they just need each other. This closeness to Russia was an uncanny guarantee for her that the two countries would and should have good relations in the future, which, in turn, was an indirect assurance that the situation for Russians in Kazakhstan would not worsen. Russia was seen as a 'protector from afar.' Although, Elena was only poorly coping with being forced to retire and getting a small pension but she was unable to leave Kazakhstan because of her 'roots.' She reiterates the homeland narrative by calling Astana her home, "I feel comfortable here. I feel good. I feel at home, yes, at home. I loved Almaty very much in when I lived there. I was there last week, visiting friends and relatives. But I missed Astana terribly after three days. When I am here I can breathe freely, enjoying this fresh air."

Elena's story is about returning and re-claiming her 'home' in the 'north,' which she had left for Almaty in order to start her career. Under the current tacit nationalization process, Elena's return to the north, the land of her ancestors, proved challenging. Elena, as an ethnic Russian *priezzhiy*, must cope with different issues in Astana than her Kazakh counterparts.

Her arrival story of working for the state, receiving a subsided apartment, and receiving recognition for hard work all makes her a pioneer *priezzhiy*. However, the pioneer *priezzhiy* narrative was only accepted by others to a limited extent. Instead of enjoying unchallenged status as part of the new Astana elite, she faced discrimination at work because she had no Kazakh language skills. Accordingly, her coping mechanisms are also of a different kind than for ethnic Kazakh newcomers. She justifies her poor Kazakh skills by pointing to the poor quality of the Kazakh language courses and the Soviet legacy according to which urban life was Russified in terms of culture and language. As long as Elena accepted her secondary position among Kazakhstanis, she could eventually become an Astanaian. Her status is dependent on the approval of ethnic Kazakhs, who have the power to exclude or include her. In this way, Russians are reminded that, even if Astana more or less welcomes everyone, not every newcomer is equal; one has to accept the titular ethnic group as prime 'owners of the country.' Elena finds comfort in the homeland discourse and looks for reassurance in the regime under president Nazarbayev and his Astana project. As Kazakhstan's economy grows, economic incentives become more important for integration to Kazakhstani Russians. Moreover, the discourse of Astana as a progress-oriented, utopian city of the future works as a solution for contradictory experiences of marginalization. Distinctions and problems are resolved and replaced by an imaginary future of harmonious life. Astana affects the present in that it suspends current problems and divisions.

Masha: Passive and Accepting the Status Quo

Masha is a 22-year-old student from the town of Qostanay, who at the time of our encounter was a *zaochnyi* student (off-campus student, student in distance learning) in Qostanay, while living in Astana. Her sister had moved to Astana a few years earlier and Masha followed her later. She and her sister had worked for three years in *Artem*, a roofed bazaar that replaced the old bazaar of Tselinograd after acquiring a refurbished modern look. Masha was determined to stay in Astana, which she viewed as the "city of the future" and full

of opportunities. She was working seven days a week with no days off, twelve hours a day, for about $300 a month. Her mother in Qostanay was living on a pension of $100. The two daughters were supporting her financially. The Left Bank was "beautiful, comfortable, well-organized, and modern, like a Western country," she said. However, some locations in Astana, especially the market area where she worked, Masha considered unsafe, the reason being the notorious *priezzhie* from the south:

> The Left Bank is of course beautiful, the elites are there. [The Left Bank] is a totally different city. Here, on the Right Bank everything is familiar. But of course, I would like to live on the Left Bank, beautiful and civilized, because here [in the old town], there are some districts that are scary. While going home we see *priezzhie* all around here, next to the market. These people are not so cultured. God forbid that something happens!

She worried about *priezzhie*, not only as people who could verbally insult Russians, but also as trespassers who might actually cause physical harm. Being concerned for her safety, she was cautious about poor *priezzhie* men whom she believed ready to be violent and possessing a tendency to engage in criminal activities. This was allegedly because they came from villages and did not know how to behave in the city and less because they, as Kazakhs, wanted to harm Russians. No doubt ethnic concerns were also involved in Masha's and other Russians' feelings of vulnerability, but my Kazakh friends avoided that area at night for safety reasons as well. The environs of the market offer cheap accommodation and employment at unskilled and unstable jobs in the bazaar. People living there were poor villagers and that is why they were perceived as 'dangerous.' Intimidation of Russians in public was interpreted by urbanites as an 'uncivilized' trait of mostly southern, rural *priezzhie* and not worthy of urban residents. Several Russian interlocutors mentioned that urban Kazakhs would not insult them because they had good 'manners.' Masha's concern about the rural *priezzhie* is widely shared by urban and northern Kazakhs too. In this connection, inter-ethnic differences mattered less than the alleged lack of urbanity among newcomers from the countryside.

Both northern and urban, Masha is an ethnic Russian, who, like Elena, feels the need to demonstrate her loyalty to Kazakhstan and to legitimize her belonging not only to Astana, but also to Kazakhstan as a whole. She defends Kazakhstan as being a better place than Russia mostly for being more economically developed. When referring to Kazakhstan, Masha always said 'we' or 'our,' strictly identifying with Kazakhstan, while 'othering' Russia:

> We had friends who left Qostanay for Ukraine. And when they visit us here they are surprised to see the changes in Kazakhstan and they say, 'You have such a high standard civilization in Kazakhstan!' In fact, we live better than they do! And in Russia, they have a huge problem with alcoholism; we don't have it in Kazakhstan. Here the drinking problem is not as it is there. The difference is like between heaven and earth. Anyway, I would not want to live anywhere else but Kazakhstan. I want to stay here. They say 'the grass is always greener on the other side.'

Masha confirmed the generally known fact about Central Asian Russians who move to Russia, where people like Masha feel like 'strangers' and are seen as 'Central Asians' rather than genuine Russian compatriots (Kosmarskaya 2006). There is even a small number of Central Asian Russians who returned to Central Asia for various reasons, many of them feeling alienated and rejected by their fellow Russians and labeled as 'Central Asians' (ibid.: 475-505). Western and Russian-language literature predominantly emphasize the diminishing political, cultural, and social rights and role of the Russian minority in the Kazakhstan state, that tacitly supports discrimination against Russians by ethnic Kazakhs (Brubaker 2011; Laitin 1998; Peyrouse 2007; Dave 2007). Turning her attention to the phenomenon of the return migration of Russians to Central Asia and to those Russians who remained, Kosmarskaya (2006) is able to rebuke many of the myths about ethnic confrontations between Central Asians and Russians and demonstrates the creation of a specific, localized identity of 'Central Asian Russians,' who have adapted to post-Soviet changes no less successfully than locals. Along the same lines, Masha felt relaxed in Kazakhstan and not discriminated against in everyday life for not speaking Kazakh. The continuous dominance of the Russian language in all spheres of public life, and the preference of many urban Kazakhs of the 'Russian urban mode,' makes Russians like Masha, as well as Elena, feel 'at home' in Kazakhstan.

Furthermore, the status of the Russian language is guaranteed as the language of inter-ethnic communication and as an official language in Kazakhstan (Carlson 1994: 137).

Masha had no problems finding employment with a Kazakh employer in the private sector, who appreciated her honest work and did not demand knowledge of the Kazakh language, which starkly contrasts with Elena's experience of having to resign from her job. One might guess that Masha's Kazakh employer preferred hiring her, an honest worker, to taking on a 'corrupt' and 'uncultured' Kazakh Southerner. As long-term urbanites, Russians are widely perceived as competent especially because they are not considered to rely on kin or friends. Masha boasted that she won her employer's trust, despite being relatively young and mentioned that this is not easy since in the trade sector, many *priezzhie* cheat employers and disappear with big sums of money, never to be found again. Subsequently, linguistic integration does not seem to be among Masha's immediate goals, but she expressed a willingness to learn the Kazakh language in the future.

Furthermore, Masha was confident that Kazakhstan's progress would allow Kazakhs, as well as Russians, to realize their hopes and dreams. She aspired to being employed in the public sector in order to receive subsidized housing. If Astana represented the future of Kazakhstan as promoted through the media, then it was worth it to work hard and invest in one's future. Economic incentives were generally very important for my younger Russian respondents as a reason for staying in Kazakhstan. Savin (2010), in his latest analysis of surveys conducted between 2004 and 2008, shows that the adaptation of Russians in Kazakhstan follows the pattern of the situational model, meaning dependent on the economic variable. The improvement in the socioeconomic situation in Kazakhstan makes Kazakhstani Russians feel confident about their future and ethnic belonging became less politicized for them starting from the early 2000s (ibid.: 85). Indeed, Masha was convinced that president Nazarbayev was doing much more for his people, "In the future, we will become like in the

West. I think it is all thanks to our government, especially our president. May him live 100 years!"

Like Elena, Masha saw Nazarbayev as a guarantor of prosperity and peace. For Masha, there was only a feeling of being unfairly treated by the government when it came to state subsidies for housing. The government's support of the Kazakh returnees [*oralman*] includes money for housing. Masha said, "They [the *oralman*] receive apartments, money, and everything; we also live in Kazakhstan but get nothing, we have to earn the houses ourselves – why?!" Masha wished that the state would help her and her sister, who were at that time renting a one-room apartment together, by providing affordable housing. She strongly affirmed Kazakhstan's modernization discourse, while being critical of the actual results of state politics in the distribution of housing. She believed that in the future they would be able to afford housing as well.

In Astana, despite being afraid of some *priezzhie* Masha is very inclusive and accepts many *priezzhie* as equals. In this sense, being a *priezzhiy* in Astana diminishes and sometimes even removes the distinctions between the 'north' and the 'south'. Masha concluded:

> So yes, you know these 'north vs. south' divisions exist very much. My hometown [Qostanay] had more Russians and now more and more Kazakhs are arriving. But still, when I first came to Astana, I was so surprised to see so many Kazakhs. It was unusual for me. So many other nationalities live in Astana as well, all mixed. [Pause] We are all mixed and you can't tell who is who. I think it is silly to have these distinctions 'south vs. north' and others. So what?! We are all [the same] people here, we all came to live here. So, there is no difference. Being from the north, why should I dislike people from the south. They are like us, they also want to live here.

Masha was referring to the widespread cliché about the 'uncultured,' village *priezzhie*, while doubting the existence of regional differences between Southerners and Northerners. In this way, Masha is selective and had resolved for herself, at least temporarily, the divisive conflicts among newcomers who want to build their future in Astana. For now, she can keep her stereotypes and judgments about uncultured villagers, as Astana promises to destroy these distinctions (and also inequality) in the glorious future.

Masha's liminal position made her flexible about judging rural *priezzhie* and she does not feel bad about her judgments, since they would magically disappear in the utopian future of Astana anyway. There were some signs that this mixture is already taking place. Masha boasted to have found friends from different regional backgrounds, like Arsen previously. She said. "Yes, I know many people here, locals as well as many *priezzhie*, we are friends now. We work here and of course we got to know each other and we help each other out."

Since most newcomers from the south are ethnic Kazakhs, Masha is careful not to judge them. Doing so is dangerous. Disliking Southerners would in this regard be equivalent to disliking Kazakhs in general. It could provoke nationalist sentiments from southern patriots like Arsen. Masha's native town with a Russian majority gained more Kazakhs, not to mention Astana where their dominance and visibility was hard to ignore. Hence, being sensitive to inter-ethnic discrimination and exclusion, Masha chose a safer urban-rural division over than a more problematic south-north divide. For Kazakhs, the south-north discourse was inoffensive since it was mostly about criticizing their own co-ethnics, who, at the end, enjoyed a higher status than Russians. As a Russian, Masha was disadvantaged. But compared to rural *priezzhie* from the South, she, as an urbanite, was more welcomed by ethnic Kazakhs who had come from urban areas. Masha did not mention that she needs to learn Kazakh in order to feel welcomed in Astana.

Masha wanted to change her Qostanay *propiska* to become an Astanaian and get a job in the public sector, after finishing her studies. She said for any job, and especially one in the public sector, she needs an Astana *propiska.* She wanted to get all the formalities right by following the official rules, as this was her only chance to make a career in Astana. Masha's loyalty to Kazakhstan seemed to be largely connected to the economic growth and relative prosperity visible in Astana. But, at the same time, she was aware that ethnic Kazakhs received better treatment than Russians, as the case with repatriates receiving benefits proves.

Optimism for Astana's grand future offered her the opportunity to feel equal with equal chances to succeed. As such she was not different from other *priezzhie* in Astana, who shared a liminal position in the hope that the future will bring benefits, prosperity, and equality for everyone. As long as this 'Astana dream' appeared attainable, despite ethnic and regional divisions, Masha was hopeful about her integration and did not imagine moving to Russia. President Nazarbayev himself personally provided this orientation, as Masha said, "Our President is giving us direction; there is progress; everything is good; there is no war. Thanks to him, we have a future and we have hopes."

Nurjan and Natasha: Excluding Southerners and Rural *Priezzhie*

For natives of pre-capital Tselinograd, the move of the capital from Almaty was a status change first and foremost, since they transformed from being residents of a small provincial town to being residents of the new capital. In the face of such changes, 'locals,' [*mestnye*] or 'natives,' [*korennye*] are protective of their town and express both a sense of loss, as well as great satisfaction and gratitude regarding its radical transformation. When newcomers flooded in to create the new capital, the natives were not pleased to welcome them, since only some of them were deemed worthy of being new residents. The locals also partly assumed the role of 'ceremony masters' (Turner 1969), who either approve the transition of newcomers into locals or reject the applicants as premature and unfit. Their evaluations are based, in this case, on the degree of newcomers' urban socialization, their acknowledgment of the natives' symbolic primacy and moral authority, and their demonstration of loyalty to Astana, to list only most important criteria.

Nurjan, 33 years old, is a local Kazakh born in Tselinograd. He has witnessed his sleepy hometown change into the new capital and, at the same time, feels lost in the pool of newcomers. Certainly, Nurjan was happy to live in the new capital with its improved infrastructure. His life changed along with his town. Among with obvious gains, however, there came also negative aspects, like expensive rents and high prices for nearly everything.

Nurjan worked at the Ministry of Health as a quality controller in the facility management for hospitals; he was on the state payroll. He said that in his interactions with his new colleagues, regional divisions were strong, of which the 'north-south' fissure was the strongest. Other regional divisions were less marked, such as 'south vs. east', for example. When I asked what changes he did not like he started complaining about the Southerners:

> The city is divided. Regions matter a lot. I don't want to get into politics, but still I see that the 'north' is fighting with the 'south', while the 'south' is fighting with the 'east'. We have such a problem in this city [laughs]. A lot of *priezzhie* here and they take up all the leading positions. Like those people from Chimkent in the south. They control the Department of Internal Affairs, *Yugo* [Southern] as they say. [Pause]. And all the high positions with high ranks are all taken by them. And the Defense Ministry is dominated by East Kazakhstan. And so they start competing with each other.

Nurjan was sarcastic and tried to be humorous while confirming the stereotypes. He readily accepted and even exaggerated them because he was rather annoyed and frustrated about feeling an outsider in his own hometown. He talked about the Southerners with irritation, saying he had nothing in common with them. They were strangers to him who had their 'own' ways of dealing with things, which were alien to Nurjan, whose statements echoed Alima's, who also referred to a different 'mentality' among Southerners. I asked if he, too, had obtained his current position through connections:

> No, of course not. I found it myself, as one normally does. But today – even if you send your application, no one looks at it. Usually it is done through prearrangement or through a phone call. Well, how to say it. [pause] No, not through prearrangement. I don't know how to put it or what to call it properly. To be honest, it is rare to meet a local at my work at the ministry. My colleagues asked me, "Are you *priezzhiy*? No, I am not *priezzhiy*, I am a local. – You are a local?! But how did you get here?!" – And I start thinking, really, hmm, how did I manage to get my job? Well, I say I worked hard and got hired. [laughs]

Nurjan seemed amused by the reactions of his *priezzhie* colleagues, who expressed great surprise to find out that he is a local native. He seemed not to know exactly how these 'prearrangements and phone calls' function because he has not had any direct experience, I assume. Nurjan also explicitly stated that he does not take bribes, despite his meager salary.

"By law, I am not allowed to take bribes because the penalty is from six to twelve years in jail [laughs]." One explanation for his refusal to take bribes is that he feared losing his job because competition for government jobs is fierce, and because he did not have the connections to secure his position if he were caught. Although Nurjan was probably better qualified than some of his superiors, he was unsure if he would keep his job in the near future. He was a native and a Northerner, thus Russified and urban in terms of behavior, like Alima and Masha. These qualities put Nurjan at a disadvantage in comparison to his Southern co-ethnics, who behaved in a way he found alien and had better connections for competing in Astana.

An elderly Russian woman, Natasha, also a local native of Tselinograd, showed very similar attitudes towards the newcomers. She was outraged about the *priezzhie* government workers or *chinovniki*:

> Why are they [*chinovniki*] rich? They steal and take bribes. That's what they do! It holds true at all levels of the government. Based on his salary, a middle-ranking government worker cannot build three or four villas, buy ten or fifteen apartments and sublet them to others. But all of them do so. And then they have restaurants, hotels, and gas stations. All of this on a salary?! Working for a ministry, an ordinary *chinovnik* cannot possess such a colossal amount of wealth! Such a display never happened in Tselinograd before! And now in Astana I see it everywhere. We have only millionaires here. And they compete with each other and compare who has a better house or car.

The conspicuous visibility of wealth of some elite incited very negative emotions on the part of the locals. Many locals have witnessed how the new elite (mostly Kazakhs) relied on their kin relations to benefit from the resources in the capital and how some managed to accumulate considerable wealth in a very short time. Their favorite activity was said to be displaying their wealth and power, and competing with each other in conspicuous consumption. Natasha generalized all new bureaucratic elite in Astana as corrupt, but she particularly complained about the absence of civilized manners among newcomers from the south. She said they littered in the streets, treated their wives badly, and insulted Russians.

Thus, Southerners were perceived by natives like Arsen and Natasha as corrupt, in the first place, and, secondly, lacking in refined, urban manners and cultural capital. The natives asserted their moral authority over Southerners, blaming them for excessive cheating, such as avoiding formal rules, which also made them unfit for an urban, 'civilized' milieu, where urbanites live following the formal rules. Southerners were viewed as rural newcomers in this sense because they did not know how to behave like urbanites. In this light, many natives feel their city does not belong to them anymore; they wish to make their presence more significant and visible.

Ainur, a young local student, recalled a conversation with a former Almaty resident, who is now a factory director in Astana. The director said to her, "Astana has become Astana because of us. We came and made it the capital. And what did you achieve? What did you have here before?! Nothing!" Ainur was not able to reject such claims, but had to admit that the city had been scary before and that there was not always electricity, running water, and that the buildings were really ugly. Ainur said that she does not like it when *priezzhie* start criticizing Astana. Her response was to tell them to go back to their villages and home towns if they do not like it. She concluded, "If they live here and earn money, why do they offend and insult Astana? They have to show some respect." She was annoyed that many newcomers complained about the city and refused to leave, while they benefited from the resources it offered. For her, Astana was not only the shiny Left Bank, she embraced it with all its shortcomings: "Astana is my city, and I love it despite everything." Such a strong commitment was demonstrated as a sign of loyalty and genuine care for Astana, which many newcomers lacked. Other natives also mentioned that all *priezzhie* were 'pragmatic' and viewed Astana as a resource only for personal enrichment and material gain.

Moreover, many locals saw newcomers as 'cheaters' who hastily appropriated an Astana identity and then claimed to be locals. They are seen as opportunists at best. As Ainur put it, "The thing is, many of those who just came two or three years ago claim themselves as

Astanchane. They don't admit that they came from Semipalatinsk or somewhere else. They try to give the wrong impression that they lived here all their lives. But this does not count!!" Laszczkowski makes similar observations: The natives were opposing the claims of newcomers calling themselves 'locals' as premature (2012: 82). He further shows how the pre-capital residents of Tselinograd, the *tselinogradtsy*, regained collective symbolic control over urban space by means of 'spatial intimacy' (ibid.: 163). In this process, they "mobilize memories of growing up and dwelling in spaces now either erased or thoroughly transformed" (ibid.: 144). They created intimate connections and showed their knowledge of the urban environment, including an ironic attitude towards the city's flaws. In this, they "embrace that spatio-temporal 'marginality' and reconstruct it as a collective identity" (ibid.: 120). The new Left Bank was socially meaningless to most native residents, who mostly live in the old parts of the town. Locals I met, like Natasha and Ainur, did not spend much time on the Left Bank or visit the new restaurants and bars, which they cannot afford anyway. They felt estranged from the new parts of their town and preferred their familiar milieu instead. Thus, the natives embraced their 'marginal' position. As Thomassen (2014) reminds us, some scholars associate liminality with marginality, but liminality is not about being socially excluded and marginalized. Liminality pertains to newcomers only and does not include the position which the natives occupy; the locals are 'rooted' in the past and therefore cannot enter liminality.

The local natives exercise power over the southern and rural *priezzhie*, even if at times they are not recognized as legitimate by the latter. Ironically, the natives, in their turn, were reduced by former Almaty residents to being provincial and lagging behind the more competitive *priezzhie*. Almaty residents, like the factory director Ainur mentioned, did not consider natives important or worthy of consideration. Locals, from their new marginal position, readily reproduced regional differences, at times exaggerating them in order to retain some sense of control over their town. The rural *priezzhie*, in turn, were often poor and had to struggle with expensive housing, finding jobs, and obtaining a *propiska*. In comparison to

them, the natives enjoyed a higher living standard. They do not have to pay rent and have an authentic *propiska*, which makes securing employment easier. Many *priezzhie* are envious that the dwellers in this provincial town gained the status of residents of the new capital 'overnight.' They enjoy this stability and being unique, despite their small numbers. In contrast, the status of the *priezzhie* is ambiguous and they undergo a series of trials before gaining the status of *Astanchane*. However, criticism by natives does not extend to the Astana discourse. They are thankful to live in the new capital and praise the president. They judge people who openly express critical opinions of the capital as being unpatriotic.

Analysis: *Priezzhie* as *Liminal Personae*

Alima, Arsen, Elena, and Masha are all different. But, at the same time, as newcomers they share an affiliation to the ambiguous and undefined category of *priezzhie. Priezzhie*, by definition, are in a state of liminality or in 'betwixt-and-between,' such that they are neither one thing nor the other (Turner, 1969: 95). Newcomers in Astana are defined as *priezzhie* at first and, as liminal *personae*, they undergo a transformation of identities and personalities.

In order to enter a liminal stage, a series of physical and psychological separations must take place. Passage from one status to another is accompanied by a parallel passage in space (Turner 1983: 58); *priezzhie* who move to Astana have made a geographical move from one place to another. This marks the initial phase of separation from the familiar, which comes before the liminal period. Thomassen (2014) compares the initial separation from one's place to a mixture of joy and anxiety, like the one we feel when we leave the parental household. Newcomers who were initially scared to find themselves alone in a strange city, at the same time, experienced the excitement of freedom and became independent either from their parents or extended family. In fact, newcomers enjoyed a lot of freedom in the beginning. The city did not seem to put restrictions on anyone, although it had unwritten codes of conduct. This initial freedom was best described by Raima:

> There are some cities where 'life' does not flow. No fresh blood or anything like that. They are on their own, and those few newcomers who come will disappear into the mainstream. But here in Astana, people keep coming and coming, and each one of them is valuable. He is a *priezzhiy*. In other words, if someone from Chimkent comes to my hometown of Pavlodar, he will slowly be Russified. He becomes a Pavlodarian. But when people come to Astana, they remain themselves. They can afford to do so because this city does not yet have a distinctive character. It lacks characteristics belonging to a city; there is no strict frame which everyone is pushed to comply with. So, this is a city of free people who keep coming in, and each one of them can behave the way he wants or is used to.

One year later, meeting Raima again, I asked how she felt about the city now. She said:

> Last year I probably said, nooo, I will not stay here, I will leave!' Now, of course, I feel ashamed for those words. I don't know, but something changed during this year. I don't know what. I don't know how to explain it, but I have somehow started feeling that Astana is my own city. The acute feeling of rejection and negativity which I felt during the first years of my stay is not there anymore.

Raima, who felt free, but at the same time alienated in Astana, had experienced a transformation. She now felt at home in Astana like Alima who declared her love of the city. For Raima and Alima, their previous Northern identity had become less relevant. The destruction of previous identities is one of the crucial psychological changes that liminal personas undergo. "Liminality is therefore a paradoxical state, both at the individual and the societal level. At the level of the individual, it is the destruction of identity, while at the level of society it involves the suspension of the structure of social order" (Thomassen 2014: 92).

Alima, from northern Kazakhstan, had come to Astana as a *priezzhiy* three years previously and already had had a well-paid job in the private banking sector. Coming from the nearby large city, she did not have to prove her urbanity. Nor was her Northerner identity as problematic as how Southerners experience their identity. She made a decision and convinced her parents to let her go and pursue her career in the new capital. Alima recalled how she realized there was no turning back and that she was to start her new life in a new city. Not knowing anyone, she had to accommodate to strangers and accept her status as a *priezzhiy*. But Alima's life took an unexpected turn when she lost her job and her boyfriend, whom she hoped to marry after moving to Astana. It was a hard blow for her, but what kept her in

Astana was the realization that she had changed and that she could not go back to her previous life in Karaganda where she felt a 'stranger,' while Astana was now 'her city.' Her present life and most importantly future were unmistakably connected with Astana and, thus, with becoming an Astanaian. Recognition can be a "dawning accompanied by surprise, shock, and bafflement and even anxiety when one is forced to recognize 'I am not the same as I was, as I used to be'" (Strauss 1996: 94-95 cited in Beech 2011: 289). "Hence, liminality can be defined as a reconstruction of identity (in which the sense of self is significantly disrupted) in such a way that the new identity is meaningful for the individual and their community" (Beech 2011: 287). The 'subjective world' of the liminal phase enabled Alima to think and see things differently (Cocker 2012: 60). Being quite aware of this change, she called herself a 'localized' Astanaian. This new status might not, however, have been recognized by natives or other *priezzhie* who enjoyed the unchallenged status of Astanaians, like, for example, the former *Almatynsy*. Therefore, the incorporation of Alima into the new society was not yet complete. Her subjective evaluation was however no less important, as it is a marker of the internal acceptance of personal change.

Southerners like Arsen, who was proud of coming from the south and speaking Kazakh, nonetheless, slowly changed into urban *priezzhie* through urban socialization in Astana. Arsen was shaping his new identity, which was accompanied by a series of psychological processes such as experimentation with new roles, recognition of change, and reflection on his new status (Beech 2011: 288-289). Finally, Arsen proved himself equally competent and competitive by landing a job at a prestigious bank. And although this happened only after his family connections failed to obtain him a job he liked, he importantly learned a valuable lesson for himself: Regardless of what others promise or say, he needed to rely on himself. This signals a psychological turn, which changed his previous views and assumptions that it was *only* through important connections or bribes that one could get ahead in life. This perception is widespread in Kazakhstan, but is said to be particularly strong in the south. After

graduation from university, instead of looking for a job, Arsen spent three months visiting his parents in the south. His friends who were *priezzhie* from all over Kazakhstan showed more initiative and established themselves as successful entrepreneurs without much help, which, in turn, motivated Arsen to rely on himself. Astana was an exception. Unlike cities either in the south or the north, the rules seem vague; therefore, *priezzhie* had to figure out what worked and what did not. At the end, Arsen was proud to identify himself as an ambitious *priezzhie*, who worked hard and did not judge others based on their place of origin. In this sense, Astana was an individualizing machine, redefining mutual dependence according to vertical networks of patronage and horizontal ones based on kin and friendship (Alexander and Buchli, 2007). There was ambivalence about the moral superiority of kin-based relations over market-based ones in the 1990s, during the early transition to market economy. During my field research, Astana was further legitimating these new social relations. Arsen took a risk by taking initiative, which proved to be a successful experiment. Moreover, he recognized that this decision had changed his previous norms. From a Southerner and 'villager,' he had evolved into an urban and self-reliant *priezzhiy*. But, for the time being, Arsen was neither a Southerner nor an Astanaian; he was in between the two, a *priezzhiy*. Both Alima and Arsen were undergoing a transformation of identities, which needed to be acknowledged by the new community.

Elena and Masha, as Russian *priezzhie* in Astana, also experienced a liminal stage, but of a different kind. Elena, who experienced linguistic discrimination, had to give up her high-status government position and accept the primacy of ethnic Kazakhs. It was hard for Russians to come to terms with the loss of their superior position as 'carriers of civilization.' Elena was caught in between. She was unable to move to Russia since she feels 'rooted' in Kazakhstan although she was coping badly with the changes and felt unfairly treated. Her son did not want to leave either, but at the same time he had a hard time establishing his career in Astana. Masha, as a young student, did not face any problems with finding a job in the trade

sector, however poorly paid. As a temporary student job, it was satisfactory and she was hopeful of getting a well-paid job in the government sector in the long run. Russians were still valued for their 'urban culture' and manners and thus seen as fitting into Astana's modern urban space. As *priezzhie*, they were considered better than 'villager' Kazakhs, albeit not admitted to the new elite Astanaians made up of mostly ethnic Kazakhs. The older generation remained in extended liminality, going through what Turner calls the 'institutionalization of liminality' (1969: 109) and remaining unintegrated, while the younger generation expressed optimistism about integration as long as the economy flourished and 'inter-ethnic' peace was guaranteed. The utopian Astana was open to everyone. Among the younger generation, its promises worked not only for Kazakhs, but for Russians like Masha as well, who said she felt included and expressed confidence about seeing her future in Astana free of discrimination and conflict. These Russian *priezzhie* 'love Astana' and share a vision with Kazakhs according to which their wishes and desires are projected into the imaginary of a bright future.

In this connection, Turner observes that neophytes entering ceremonies of transition become equal, while many levels of previous subordinations cease to exist (1967: 99). Distinction and gradation play a minimal role. *Priezzhie* become symbolically equal when they identify each other as *priezzhie* and are defined as such by others. As Alima put it, 'We are all *priezzhie* after all.' Newcomers were not equal, as we have seen, but these differences became unimportant when they identified themselves collectively as *priezzhie*, referring to the common experience of transformation they were all undergoing. As such, they accepted each other as competing for the status of Astanaian and as following similar ambitions of first becoming a successful *priezzhiy* to obtain this end. Every *priezzhiy* was allowed to pursue this dream and achieved a status transformation. In this, *priezzhie* became nameless and timeless, 'existing in a floating state of being' (Thomassen 2014: 92). They found themselves in the in-between-ness of identity reconstruction. Zukin states that liminality depicts a 'no man's land,' which is open to everyone's experience, although, not easily navigated without a guide (1991:

268). Certainly, reality looked different and the transition was differently experienced according to the neophytes' ethnicity, regional affiliations, and place in the urban-rural divide, to which gender, class, and other dimensions might be added. As we have seen, *priezzhie* from Almaty, as a privileged social group, established themselves at the top of the hierarchy. For Northerners and urbanites, it was easier than for Southerners and rurals to experience transition. The most recent newcomers were seen as 'unclean' because they were considered to literally pollute those who have passed over the threshold and have reestablished themselves in the new structure (Turner 1967:95). In this vein, the rural *priezzhie* were viewed as especially ignorant and as 'neophytes' who still have to learn the urban manners and behaviors, before being inaugurated into the "city of the future." Newcomers were expected to acquire new knowledge and experience before they could be integrated into Astana.

Next, liminality opens up a space for introducing elements that might contradict dominant values and institutions, which allows actors to experiment with and to try out these new roles and identities. Therefore, feelings of fear, doubt, questioning authority and social values, displacement, and skepticism are all part of the experience of the transformation. Turner (1969) recognizes the unique potential of 'anti-structure' for rejuvenating the existing structure and enabling change. This can be observed among the native locals of pre-capital Tselinograd. They rejected the arrogance of the newcomers and were skeptical of and ambivalent about some changes; though nostalgic for their 'lost' city, they were happy to witness improvements in infrastructure. They had to come to terms with being an insignificant minority in their own radically transformed hometown. To find their own position in the social hierarchy, they asserted moral authority like 'ceremony masters' in order to retain symbolic power over newcomers. They reproduced regional animosities coupled with rejection of the *priezzhie's* new wealth and status as unearned. However, at the end they, too, praised the new look of Astana and praised President Nazarbayev for investing his energy in

making their city beautiful. They were not against the Astana discourse, but they were against some of the newcomers (Southerners) and government workers who disproportionately benefited from resources in the new capital city.

Finally, the newcomers question the given social order by redrawing social boundaries or re-evaluating existing social norms. *Priezzhie*, as liminal beings, are engaged in challenging Kazakhstan's regional divides, on the one hand, while reproducing the general discourse on urbanity and rurality, on the other. The notion of urbanity retains its importance. But in addition to Russian, it now requires the new elite to have proficiency in the Kazakh language. Masha openly rejected the importance of the 'north-south' divide, while complementing rural stigma with the traits of violence and poverty. Poverty thus becomes a basis for exclusion, reinforced by a perceived lack of urbanity. For Elena, ethnic affiliation acquired new salience in Astana as a result of her linguistic barrier. For Alima and Arsen, regional affiliation remains significant but, with time, they become more pragmatic and flexible, making use of every kind of capital they have in order to succeed. At the same time, in a climate of heightened competition, when difficulties arise, one is prone to find an explanation for them by exaggerating the country's regional animosities. Established discourses are being actively reconsidered by *priezzhie*; continuities, as well as breaks, have been observed. In a liminal stage, contradictions may coexist, just as a liminal *personae* possesses some of the attributes of both the 'before' and 'after' stages; multiple meanings are present (Beech 2011: 287).

To conclude, liminality is about change. Without change of status, liminality has no meaning. Suspension of the structure of social order is only temporary. The aim of the ritual is to return to conditions of stability and normality. "This happens by forging a new identity in the individual case, reflecting a shift of one's position within the social order" (Thomassen, 2014: 92). Liminality presents a great likelihood of uncertainty, if it is prolonged for an undefined period of time. No *priezzhiy* wants to stay a *priezzhiy* forever; he or she wants to

settle down and not be stuck in the 'arrival' phase. The ultimate aim is to become a new resident of Astana, an Astanaian [*Astanchanin*]. Each newcomer, regardless of place of origin, ethnic or regional affiliation, hopes to attain this status. The stories of newcomers that are about arriving in Astana and becoming *priezzhie* are open, flexible, and ambiguous, as they should be in a transitory stage. Liminal identities are functional to a certain degree, allowing a person to move between the different identity categories. Newcomers have the right to remain a *priezzhiy,* in a transit zone. In general, the life of *priezzhie* is hard. The myriads of difficulties include finding affordable accommodation, getting a *propiska,* and finding a job. Astana is equally harsh to everyone, and whether they make it in the city or not depends on many factors. Not all transitions go smoothly, as Thomassen (2014) reminds us. Many fail to experience a smooth transition to being an Astanaian; some achieve it partly, like Arsen and Alima; others go back to their hometowns, while the rest may become stuck in an extended liminal stage with possible negative psychological consequences, such as detachment and disillusionment. Obtaining housing is hugely important, as will be described in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 3. HOUSING PRACTICES

Against the background of Astana's spectacular architecture, homeownership comprises part of the "Astana dream" lifestyle. Practical realities, as demonstrated by the renting situation, however, significantly diverged from this dream. The ownership of housing was the single most desired commodity, but as well the hardest one to attain. Many newcomers to the city, impressed by the construction boom and the building of residential housing, hoped to obtain newly built apartments. The prospects for buying an apartment in newly built housing compounds proved to be unrealistic for the majority of *priezzhie.* In this context, next to the emergent, new, affluent homeowning, upper middle class, another group, the 'renters,' constituted the vast majority of newcomers to Astana. Struggling with expensive housing, many *priezzhie* realized that renting was the only option available to them, at least for the near future.

During the construction of Astana, most energy was focused on grand monumental construction projects, thereby leaving the residential housing sector neglected, which resulted in a shortage of adequate housing for many newcomers (Köppen 2013: 14). Kazakhstan experienced a GDP growth of about 10% in the ten years starting from 2000 due to direct foreign investment in the oil industry, which also meant that Astana's sizable international community pushed rental prices up (Yessenova 2010). Real estate market prices were inflated due to the housing "bubble" in Kazakhstan. The construction boom in Astana eventually increased the supply of new residential housing in Astana, but prices remained unaffordable for many because of the housing "bubble," which created a speculative real estate market, while salaries remained low for the majority of people. In the meantime, the rental market grew. The government has ignored the rental market, leaving it up to the private sector. The stories of renters in Astana were not included in public discussions and therefore remained marginalized. Most renters in Astana could not imagine renting for the rest of their lives, because rent swallowed a large portion of their salaries, sometimes up to 80%. Indeed some of

my respondents worked two or three jobs, hoping to save up enough money to buy their own apartments.

In this chapter, I would like to ask how the practical realities of being a tenant in Astana in shared apartments affect the way newcomers experience and imagine Astana. How do newcomers cope when they fail to secure housing in newly built apartments, seductively promised by the discourse about Astana as the "city of the future"? To address this, I follow Setha Low's reasoning on the social construction of space, which includes the experience of space as people's daily use of a material setting, transforming and creating meanings (Low 2000: 128). Housing and renting practices are about directly accommodating built materiality and attaching meaning to it. *Priezzhie,* as renters, must find affordable housing and maintain good relationships with their landlords and other, often transient, subtenants. They also need *propiska* [registration] and employment. These things demand resources of all kinds, but also a certain urban behavior and attitudes that newcomers cultivate and internalize. I first discuss the importance of homeownership in post-Soviet Kazakhstan against the background of Soviet legacy of housing shortages. Then, I address the legacy of Soviet residential registration, *propiska*, which continues to play an important role in independent Kazakhstan. At the end of the chapter, I compare the experience of an elderly woman in her 50s to that of the younger generation (between 20 und 30 years old) when it comes to renting practices. I argue that renting as a form of people's interaction with the built environment in Astana produces a distinctive liminal housing experience backed by a heterotopic urban space. I show how renting is socially constructed as liminal housing by newcomers, who have to deal with expensive housing in Astana. This social order is also connected with the value of homeownership, which newcomers reinforce, instead of demanding affordable rents. As liminal housing, renting was a highly unstable and temporary mode of living, which, nonetheless, had become accepted as part of living in the futuristic capital and as part of the urban living mode of Astana.

Housing Distribution and Desire for Homeownership

Soviet cities, despite being considered the "cradle of civilization," suffered from chronic housing shortages. In the Soviet Union, Central Asian cities were especially prey to overcrowding (Morton and Stuart 1984). One reason for this was the influx of newcomers, usually from the European parts of the USSR during periods of rapid industrialization in the aftermath of the Second World War (Alexander and Buchli 2007). In general, during Soviet times, access to big cities was mostly reserved for the children of the privileged, who could secure jobs in them through bribery and other forms of corruption, while the children of the poor were sent to remote areas, at least for a few years (Rigi 2003: 38). Higher wages, better services, and goods were all part of the city life, as opposed to village life, as described in Chapter 2. In Soviet times and today, Central Asian urban populations constituted a mixture of those living in single family houses in the cities or on their outskirts and urban apartment dwellers. The latter had an advantage when it came to amenities, such as hot water and gas and heating, while the former represented a "village" mode of life with outdoor toilets and garden plots. Needless to say, living in an apartment in the city was considered a privilege in Soviet times. What is different today is that many new single-family houses are being built with amenities and expensive building materials which were previously unavailable. Accordingly, there is much greater variety in the types of houses and apartments being built at present. Homeowners are likewise now differentiated by criteria, such as location of the apartment, style and design. There is the emergence of the 'VIP *gorodok*' (VIP city settlement), with walls meant to protect the lavish elite houses of the newly rich, guarded by security staff. These are the new gated communities in Astana. Such houses [*kottedzhy*] are hidden behind tall and thick walls and are a distinctive urban phenomenon in other post-socialist cities (Alexander et al. 2007: 25-27). But in Astana many of them display fanciful styles.

In Soviet cities and towns, one had to wait years before being entitled to receive an apartment, which usually was allocated through one's place of work or the local municipality. As Morton puts it, "the tyranny of the allocation process" controlled Soviet housing distribution through organizational allegiance (Morton 1980: 242, cited in Bissenova 2012: 76). Since there was no private ownership, people received registration [*propiska*] as living in these allocated apartments. Even though people could not buy or sell housing, they could exchange or inherit it (Bissenova 2012: 76). Soviet discourses on the 'housing issue' concerned achieving equitable housing conditions for majority of the population. This meant that the style and quality of Soviet housing did not differ much from city to city, due to using the same cheap prefabricated construction materials (cement blocks) to build mass houses like the five-story *Khrushchevka* blocks and later, the Brezhnev houses of the 1980s (ibid.: 71–74). After the post-1991 liberalization period, most apartments were privatized by their long-term tenants for a small fee based on the occupants' registration, *propiska.* Discussing the role of *propiska,* Hatcher and Thieme (2015: 11) argue that during the early privatization period, *propiska* holders became entitled to ownership rights, which made the *propiska* an important instrument in transition towards capitalist logic. As such, Hatcher and Thieme demonstrate how the Soviet legacy of *propiska* has been "domesticated" and incorporated into the logic of capitalism and changed property relations. The Soviet tenant agreement was legally secure, which made it similar to a property right, close to private homeownership (Marcuse 1996, cited in Hatcher and Thieme 2015).

In Kazakhstan today, unlike in Soviet times, the majority of people have to rely on their own resources to secure housing. Homeowners are now free to manage their properties as they wish; they can sell their houses or rent them out. In post-Soviet Central Asia, private property has become very valuable capital, used to generate even more capital in the market economy, as landlords quickly learned to take advantage of their newly acquired property. Over 90% of housing has been privatized in the post-Soviet period (Lipman 2012). The major

difference since independence is that Kazakhstan's housing policy changed from state-driven to one that encourages homeownership through mechanisms of the market economy, such as attracting foreign investments and developing banks and financial institutions (Rolnik 2011). Western governments and international organizations have also played a role by encouraging the growth of private ownership in the developing world (Hatcher 2015). This reveals an inherent negative bias towards renting as an alternative to homeownership, which is promoted by many governments as a way to foster individual autonomy and responsibility (UN Habitat 2003; Gilbert 2008, cited in Hatcher 2015). Renting is thus seen as undesirable and negative in comparison to homeownership.

In present-day Kazakhstan, the state offers subsidized social housing only to government officials and to selected public sector workers. Civil servants are eligible for state housing as a priority group. The state housing program [*gosudarstvennaia zhilishnaia programma*], similar to socialist redistribution, allows public sector employees to receive low-interest mortgages to buy subsidized housing for $350 per square meter. It offers housing below market value for state employees [*budjetniki*] in healthcare and middle- and low-ranking government workers [*gosslujashije*] (Bissenova 2012: 147). Between the period of 2008–2011, the list included 430,000 families in Kazakhstan (ibid.). Teachers or doctors, as well as young workers under the age of twenty-nine, were also eligible for state housing and many received apartments. According to Bissenova, about 200,000 people have moved into their new apartments in Astana (2012: 68). However, public officials and civil servants are neither low-income nor a socially vulnerable group in urgent need of housing. A United Nations Report of the Special Rapporteur on the right to adequate housing in Kazakhstan correctly notes that the country's current Housing Relations Act supports the already-advantaged, giving civil servants equal rights to subsidized housing as the vulnerable and disadvantaged groups, such as the disabled (Rolnik 2011). Between 2005–2007, more than 35,000 priority citizens, such as civil servants, gained access to housing, in comparison to

only 10,000 persons from socially protected groups, such as low-income families (ibid.). As a case in point, a young couple working as medical staff in Astana was entitled to housing as Saule, the wife, said, "Oh, I like everything here! Our house is here. I received an apartment in 2006 through a government program. I was lucky. I work in the public sector. We live in a nice, warm, new home! At this moment we are, of course, satisfied. We get a small salary. But we have extra earnings here and there."

Dilnaz, my roommate, bribed one of her colleagues at a local court who knew people who registered candidates for such a housing program. It turned out that Dilnaz was never put on the list and she was cheated out of $2000, which she desperately tried to get back without much success. It seems the distribution of state housing is prone to manipulation and many people who do not qualify for such housing try to get registered on the list through various, often illegal, means. An opposition newspaper, *Svoboda Slova*, published numerous articles on housing, one of which was absolute outrage expressed about a middle-ranking government employee who secured himself twenty-four brand-new apartments in a new housing complex on the fashionable Left Bank, the new part of Astana. It was unclear how he managed to buy so many apartments. Housing distribution was the subject of many scandals in Astana and many ordinary people thought that government officials receive multiple apartments through corrupt means. As Zhanara, a young woman who has been renting a shared room for several years, explained:

> In these new apartments, only the rich are living and those who work for the government. They can afford so they buy these apartments and then rent them out to us, ordinary people. And we, mortals, go and pay expensive rents. In this way they make money from us. So we rent for three or four years or much longer. That's how it is. What can you do? Life is like this.

In this way, Astana's newest part of the town, the Left Bank, was becoming a sanctuary for the affluent upper classes and for government employees, who managed to buy or receive subsidized apartments through the government housing program. Those who were not

employed in the public or government sector had no chance at subsidized housing and had to cope with being tenants.

Many individuals who were not eligible for state housing took out mortgages from banks. *Ipoteka* is an acronym for the Russian *ipotechnoe kreditovanie*, meaning a home loan or credit. These became very popular starting in the early 2000s, reaching a peak in the pre-financial-crisis years of 2006–2008. The Kazakhstan state encouraged national banks to promote the local credit market, which led to a situation in which obtaining a bank loan became easier than getting a passport (Yessenova 2010: 20–21). Many saw taking out an *ipoteka* as a solution for the housing shortage. *Ipoteka* was the word of the day. People young and old, even children, instantly understood what it meant, with all the problems associated with the term. One thing that struck me during my fieldwork was the sheer amount of information on housing, renting, and *ipoteka* that was circulating in mass media, especially regarding scandals and rumors dealing with corrupt deals surrounding housing. *Ipoteka* became immensely popular method from obtaining housing in Astana's booming construction sector. In Astana, many people started to take out loans to invest in multiple apartments with the sole purpose of renting them out. This in turn also contributed to speculation in real estate prices in Kazakhstan as a whole.

Kazakhstan's housing "bubble" in 2002–2008 trapped many Astana residents, who were caught up in a "housing rush" of buying and re-selling their property. Despite having invested energy and time in expensive renovations, they were ready to put their property up for sale again (Bissenova 2012: 133–135). They were lured by the prospects of a quick profit and multiplying apartments, using one apartment as collateral to take out a loan for a second and third apartment (ibid.). Investing in new construction projects in order to resell the acquired property has been the most lucrative investment market in Kazakhstan, with housing prices growing 50–60 percent annually (ibid.: 121.). Bissenova writes that housing speculation was driven by a "voracious desire and demand to live well [*zhit' kak liudi*]," to

'keep up with the Joneses' (ibid.: 123). The motto was, "You have to buy today, not tomorrow; consume now, not later. If you don't have hard cash now, buy on credit" (ibid.: 123). In this situation, stability became undesirable and seen as stagnation or even "lagging behind" the rest. Finally, the government had unrealistic hopes that the construction boom would help the national economy by stimulating construction-related industrial development and creating jobs (ibid.: 140).

The desire to live in one's own home is not only about catching up with the others. Renting is undesirable because it is simply too expensive and many consider paying high rents as "waste of money" or "paying into someone else's pocket." Ksysha, a young Russian woman in her 20s, preferred to pay for a mortgage than pay high rent; she thinks rent money should be invested in homeownership:

> It is easy to find a place to rent, but you need to consider with whom and where you will live, and how much it costs. Nobody wants to pay [rent] to some stranger. It is simply not your apartment. If it was my own apartment through *ipoteka* for which I was paying a monthly credit fee, I would pay this money. This apartment would be my own apartment at the end. Otherwise I don't want to pay. People pay 50,000 or 60,000 Tenge [$350 or 400] to rent a one-room apartment. I don't understand it. It would be better if this money went to cover *ipoteka*. In my hometown, Petropavlovsk, I never thought about the housing issue, never had to deal with it. Even when I would see on TV that people are suffering because of a lack of housing, I could never understand them. And only after having to deal with renting in Astana can I understand them. It is like an obsession to have my own apartment now.

Not only have the government and international community neglected the growing number of tenants in Astana, but tenants themselves embrace the ideal of homeownership as the most desirable option. The high rents only increase their wish to shed the burden of renting. A single mother in her late 30s working for a Turkish construction company, Anara, had come to Astana three years before from a village 200 kilometers away and was renting a "bed" space in a shared crowded apartment:

> The only thing that bothers me is when I see these shopping and entertainment centers built one after another, why can't they build social housing?! It's true, everyone will tell you this. I wish they [the government] built affordable housing. Why not? A person like me, who is working hard but doesn't have other opportunities to earn more. I cannot afford to buy an apartment at the present market price. I cannot get

> housing through the state housing program either because I am not a state employee. But I don't want to work for the state; they pay too little. That's the reason I left my job as a school teacher in the village, I was teaching Kazakh language. Who can survive on 30,000 or 40,000 [$200–250] Tenge nowadays!?

But again, my conversation with Anara ended with her assuring me that with her own hard work she too would eventually be able to afford to buy housing without relying on the state. She contradicted herself by wishing that not only state employees were eligible for state housing, but also ordinary people like her. At the same time, she did not expect any assistance or support from the state:

> I never heard of any help with rental housing from the state to be honest. I did not hear. [Pause]. I do not rely on the state. I am on my own, I am telling you, I never depend on anyone, I only count on my own efforts. For example, I am not going to blame the government or someone else because everything depends on me. I am telling you, if something does not work, I blame myself. I look for reasons and mistakes that I made. That's why I think it all depends on oneself. Yes, housing is expensive everywhere. But there are people who earn enough and buy houses. So we can do it too, I suppose. We can! My salary is enough for me. If people spent their money wisely, they would have enough. People manage to live on 30,000 Tenge and even on 15,000 Tenge [$100]. I think, I will manage, in five years, maybe, to buy an apartment, hopefully.

She assumed it will take her five years before she can achieve her dream of buying a house, although she has no real prospects at the moment. Her suggestion that people should spend money wisely means that they need to save up and be ready to sacrifice personal material comfort, as she does at the moment, living in crowded conditions, sharing one rented room with three to four people. She could afford better housing conditions, but she chose not to and was saving money to buy an apartment. If she rented a single room for herself, she would spend half of her salary or more. Furthermore, powered with self-reliance, she was looking for a second job when I met her at a job fair in Astana. With a second job, she would have been able to take out a home loan and bring her son from the village. She used her weekends to look for offers that promised quick money. Convinced that opportunities to earn more money exist in Astana, she told me her story about how three years ago she left her job as a village teacher and worked her way up from a cleaning lady to an engineer in Astana. Anara

mentioned that her relatives helped her to find a job, but without her hard work it would not be possible. She had practically no free time. Living like Anara, many *priezzhie* try to save money to invest in buying apartments or in buying plots of land on which to build houses.

The global financial crisis slowed down economic growth in Kazakhstan starting in 2008 and heavily affected the banking and construction sectors. Many people were unable to pay back their mortgages once the economy slowed down. People lost their jobs, and layoffs in the construction sector became massive. About 450 construction projects remained uncompleted in Kazakhstan, negatively affecting 60,000 shareholders, out of which 16,000 were victims of fraud from private developers and construction companies.[8] Many of these projects are located in Astana and Almaty. Consequences were heavy for some. Arsen, introduced in Chapter 2, worked in a bank's credit and mortgage department in Astana. He directly witnessed how people got into debt and unable to pay back their loans:

> A lot of people were buying apartments on *ipoteka*. Now they all regret it, since the prices have fallen drastically. People got fired; some had their salaries reduced. So people lost their jobs. How on earth are they going to pay back the *ipoteka*? In this case, the bank takes away the apartment and the person also loses his or her down payment for the apartment. Some people put their own apartment up as collateral in order to get a loan for a second home. They are really suffering, since they lose their own apartment and the second apartment with the mortgage too. There are many cases like this!! Some people even put their sister's apartment up as collateral. Some shareholders got their apartments and others were cheated, but all had invested in the same housing project. The latter were cheated by the investment company. These people took out loans, but the bank does not care if people got cheated. They have to repay their debt anyway.

Arsen was very happy that he did not take out *ipoteka* himself although he too was close to doing so a few years prior. He was satisfied with his job, although he told me that before the financial crisis he was earning about 100,000 Tenge[9] ($660), and now his salary was only 65,000 Tenge, ($430). Arsen continued to rent an apartment with his relatives in Astana. The housing "bubble" was a very harsh lesson for many Kazakhstanis. For some, it had tragic

[8] UN Housing report.
[9] The Tenge, Kazakhstan's currency: the exchange rate in 2009/2010 of was about 150 Tenge to $1 Dollar, and 200 Tenge to a Euro.

consequences. There were news reports about suicides when the banks moved to evict people from their homes for being unable to repay their mortgages. The social pressure and easily available credit led to a competition to purchase apartments, cars, fur coats and even spend money on exotic travel destinations.

In addition to *ipoteka*, various other schemes, such as participating in shareholding [*delovoe uchastie*] were available for people who wanted to invest in a property, which was not yet built, further contributing to housing speculation. A Kazakh pensioner in his 60s also complained:

> I put all of my savings into a shareholding housing project that was to be built one to two years after we had invested the money. We were cheated. The houses were never built and we did not receive our money back. We say thank you every day to the leader of the nation president Nursultan Nazarbayev. He showed his generosity when he intervened through the government to save these banks and construction companies from the crash. It was us who signed these bad contracts with the private construction companies and so we are responsible, of course. But the government failed to control these subcontractors too.

In the aftermath of the financial crisis, those who were positively affected by the government bailout praised President Nazarbayev for 'taking care' of their bad investments. The Kazakhstan state responded to the losses of the middle classes, who had invested in speculative housing projects by bailing out banks, companies, and individual homeowners threatened by bankruptcy with an initial US$10 billion anti-crisis plan (Bissenova 2012: 146). When the Kazakhstan government intervened in the mortgage crisis, many citizens put their trust back into the state as the guarantor of social justice. Profit-seeking private businesses were portrayed as being greedy and dishonest. The role of the president as 'savior' is revealing of how the government is seen as separate from the president. While the mortgage crisis was the 'fault' of the government, President Nazarbayev made things 'right' by getting personally involved. I will discuss this point in Chapter 4 in more detail.

The government promised to complete two-thirds of the unfinished housing projects through its programs for supporting social need and the welfare state (ibid). The state had to

become involved to solve the credit crisis, as the sight of unfinished construction projects would serve to undermine Kazakhstan's promise of modernization with Astana epitomizing this vision (Bissenova 2012: 146). Bissenova rightly notes that the rising, propertied middle class in Kazakhstan supports the status quo because they feel protected by the regime (Bissenova 2012). Although they are not Kazakhstan's very rich, many are aspiring to lift themselves to middle class. They back the state in its modernization quest. In this way, the state supported the already affluent, while the poor with no housing, such as renters, receive no help with their housing situation.

Seen against the background of Astana's heterotopic spatial environment, one can better understand how the housing "bubble" created fertile ground for speculative development. The government openly and implicitly promoted the exclusivity and superiority of Astana. This means that Astana was presented as far better than any other place in Kazakhstan. Astana could be characterized as a government sponsored modernization project that itself turned into a speculative project, divorced from the rest of Kazakhstan. While Astana shows off its futuristic architecture as the "city of the future," the rest of the country had to contribute to this project at the expense of its development. Rural areas are impoverished and cut off from the country's economic progress in booming Astana. Kazakhstan's rural poverty level is three times higher than its level of urban poverty (International Crisis Group 2013: 16). Widespread economic disparities are not addressed by the authorities. When one moves away from the shiny shopping malls of Astana, the picture quickly becomes gloomy, with neglected houses and schools. The residents of impoverished areas are shown images of prospering Astana as proof that their country is rich, while their own incomes and pensions remain low (ibid.). In connection to this, I recall a friend of mine who was visiting Astana for the first time from Ukraine. She said, "I heard 100 times that Astana is a special city and fifty times that Kazakhstan is a special country." Indeed, when I told this to one of my respondents in Astana, Raima, she reacted, "Yes, when you hear this so

many times, you start believing that Astana is indeed special." Hence, Astana finds support for the narrative of the special capital, which justifies Astana as "other space."

In this context, the Astana project is a "heterotopia" which Foucault (1986) defines as "places absolutely different from all the sites that they speak and reflect about"; a "counter-site, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (ibid.: 24). Heterotopias are found in any society and, as alternatives or "other places," stand outside of the conventional order of space and operate according to their own terms (ibid.). Examples include prisons, camps, and psychiatric clinics, which are crisis and deviant heterotopias. They can also include perfect utopian places like the image of Astana.

Astana, as a heterotopic place, could also organize behavior, while emergent social practices influenced these spaces (Tonkiss 2005: 131). One could argue that the behavior of prospective homeowners investing in speculative housing was intensified and partly induced by the heterotopic Astana, which mobilized agency. Just as the hyperreal Astana denies material conditions on the ground, potential homebuyers partly ignored their real purchasing power, emboldened by the promise of a spectacular built environment. Thomassen sees "bubble economies" in general as part of liminal economics, where "such bubbles must quite literally be understood as fragile surface entities floating around in space, rising above us, creating growth, increasing consumption, growing themselves – until they burst and the liminal nothingness falls down upon us" (2014: 218). Prices go up solely due to expectations instead of intrinsic value and peoples' imitative behavior, driven by passion and emotion, plays a major role. The housing "bubble" in 2008 was the biggest in history, claims Thomassen, in terms of being speculative, "the real estate market thrives on the unreal, or rather, it thrives on eliminating the very boundary of the real and unreal" (ibid.: 222–223). Commercials showing the perfect home further blurred this boundary. Thus, in addition to

allowing liminal housing to flourish, Astana's heterotopia created fertile ground for speculative housing in the first place.

As a heterotopic place, Astana is also prone to being controversial. On the one hand, promising a future-oriented social order, the new cityscape produces the "Astana effect," which seduces so many newcomers to pursue their personal futures within this collective imagination (Laszczkowki 2012). Concretely, we can see that this personal future is manifested in purchasing a newly built apartment. As Bissenova shows, the discourse of material progress is realized by the affluent citizens through upgrading one's housing situation (2012). Thus, Astana's cityscape restored a sense of future-oriented social order after the experience of the collapse of Soviet ideology but as Bissenova suggests, the housing bubble in Kazakhstan rested on a "lack of faith and confidence in the future" (ibid.: 135). I see both arguments as plausible. The new architecture instilled positive outlooks about the future; however, since this future was only partially achieved and practical realities creeped in to remind one about the incongruence of image and reality, it also created anxiety and an ensuing lack of faith. This fear was then based on the possible reversal of fragile progress, which has not yet established itself firmly. These fears were similar to the worries of the city dwellers about a regress in Soviet urbanization achievements in the ruralization narrative in the transition years of early 1990s, discussed in Chapter 1. No one was sure how long the hyper-inflated current construction boom was going to last in Astana, but many wanted to take advantage of it. Thus a paradox emerges. On the one hand, people believed in Astana's bright future; on the other, they were anxious that the dream and progress might not be stable. Still, at the end of the day, Astana was to grow and flourish with the support of the state, however, with temporary setbacks like the mortgage crisis. Dream and dissent live next to each other, affecting each other. As a result, the boom and the collapse of the housing "bubble" appeared spectacular, as if happening in an accelerated future of multiple unexpected outcomes.

Liminal Renting and the Hypercity

Many tenants were highly irritated with renting for extended periods of times; nonetheless, they accepted renting as a price they had to pay for living in futuristic Astana. The unregulated rental market offered tenants a feeling of belonging and participation in the utopian "Astana dream" life. In this light, renting practices offered a temporary solution to unaffordable housing, and a sense of participation in the "city of the future." Below I present a more detailed description about my roommates to give a grounded sense of communal living, which became an integral part of lives of newcomers.

In order to understand housing and accommodation issues for many *priezzhie*, one has to live like one of them, that is, in shared apartments with multiple subtenants. Upon my arrival in Astana in 2010, I found accommodation in a shared apartment through advertisements in newspapers. Newspapers offered quite a variety of accommodation opportunities, ranging from the most expensive newly built elite apartments on the Left Bank to shared rooms in the old town in old Soviet *Khrushchevka* apartments. After making several phone calls, I arranged to see one apartment that same day and agreed to move in the day after my visit. It was the most usual and fastest way to find affordable/cheap accommodation. My future shared home was a two-room apartment in almost-finished newly built brick housing compound in the old town, which was still considered the center of town. Many of these new housing compounds were built in a triangle shape. In the case of my compound, the left wing corner was still incomplete and also remained 'frozen' during my stay, just like many other housing projects that had run into trouble during the financial crisis. The apartment was on the top floor, the eleventh, and there was no functioning elevator. We were told that the elevator would be repaired very soon. But my roommates and I had to take the stairs every day to the eleventh floor because by the time of my departure, after more than three months, the elevator was still not working. This was my entry point into the intimate lives of my informants, who shared stories of their arrival and lives in Astana with me during my fieldwork.

Our two-room apartment was fairly spacious, with a big kitchen and a balcony. My roommate Dilnaz, 27 years old, with whom I shared a room, was working as chief of staff at the local criminal court. She was also the main tenant, who agreed to take me as a subtenant. In the other room, a living room, there was a large couch on the right corner, which turned into a bed at night, where two other subtenants slept. But soon one more person moved into our living room. Alima, our new roommate, slept on an air mattress in the left corner of the living room. During the day, everyone was allowed to use the couch in the living room and in the evening we would all gather there to watch TV. This was a communal mode of living where everything was shared. There was no private space, except the space that was allocated for sleeping. In total, it was five women sharing a two-room apartment, each paying about 14,000 Kazakh Tenge, about US$100, monthly (later two more people joined us). To rent an old one-room *Khrushchevka* apartment cost at least US$300 at the time, which equaled a typical salary for schoolteachers in Astana. Almost everyone in our shared apartment was in her 20s, had a university education, and came to Astana in search of career prospects or to study. Some were looking for a job, while others had temporary and unstable jobs. There were no statistics available on the percentage of the population that rents or shares apartments in this manner, since most tenants were not officially registered and thus not listed in official statistics. Nevertheless, nearly 70–80% of the people I interviewed were renting, usually with several other people in shared apartments. Out of about fifty newcomers I met in Astana, thirty-five people rented rooms, some rented apartments, and only thirteen were homeowners. Many of them also stated that, although they paid higher rents, their housing situation in Astana was worse than it had been in their hometowns or villages. Many renters had very little actual living space in Astana, despite the construction boom.

In the cases of such shared apartments with multiple subtenants, landlords and tenants usually did not have written leases and all matters were settled by informal negotiations and agreements. Dilnaz, my roommate, who was the main tenant in our apartment also had no

written contract with the owner of the apartment. The landlord trusted Dilnaz, and their relations were based on verbal agreement only. The same was true for the relationship between Dilnaz and us, her subtenants. We never actually met our landlord. At the beginning of each month, Dilnaz collected money from us and paid the rent. Dilnaz exercised almost unlimited authority in our apartment as she could ask any of us to move out at any time. Such arrangements were very risky for tenants, as well as landlords, since neither had legal protection of their rights and obligations. Landlords were not protected with stable and secure rental payments. Rent could be paid late or damage done to the property, since no deposits were paid as security measures. On the other side, tenants did not always receive quality housing for the high rents they paid and could be asked to leave any time without prior notice. Landlords did not always perform maintenance repairs or there were no promises concerning stable prices or the duration of the renting period. My roommates often complained about previous landlords, who had cheated them by taking rent payment in advance and then renting promised apartments to other tenants. Thus, conflicts between tenants and landlords happened quite often.

With rental prices going up in Astana, many new homeowners turned into inventive entrepreneurs overnight by becoming private landlords to make a profit from the shortage of housing; some even sublet mattress space to fit in as many people as possible and maximize profit. In Kazakhstan, it is legally allowed to sublet one's own apartment as a private landlord. The revenue is treated as additional earnings, which individuals have to declare and on which they have to pay up to 10 percent income tax. However, if the revenue exceeds a certain amount of profit or if persons are hired on a permanent basis to manage the apartments, then landlords must legally register as private entrepreneurs and pay up to two or three percent of

the profit gained from their tenant agreements.[10] The last option is to register as a legal entity or corporation and pay up to 20 percent of one's revenues in tax. If landlords fail to declare revenues and pay taxes, they are subject to administrative punishments in the form of fines. Since regulation and control are weak, most of the rental housing remains in the shadow, and there is no accurate data on the rental market. This situation creates a rental market, which is highly profitable but hardly regulated. Meanwhile, the Kazakhstan government has started to pay more attention to the rental sector to protect landlords as well as tenants. Now evictions take place according to court rules and the process lasts up to three months, during which the tenants stay in the apartment without paying rent.[11]

In many post-Soviet countries, legislation and regulation of rental housing is only starting to develop. Therefore, the private rental sector remains largely informal and undocumented because of ease of tax evasion and a lack of controls (Brzeski, Dubel and Hamilton 2006). Higher incomes have driven up rents in the more attractive, major post-socialist cities. Similar to mature Western market economies, the demand for a private rental market is especially high among the young and the mobile in post-socialist states. The rental markets in these countries are usually much smaller than in capitalist economies, but growing (ibid.).

There is a hierarchy of renting options, ranging from the elite apartments on the Left Bank, which are the most desirable, to the least desired and respected old *Khrushchevka* apartments, *vremianka*, and old Soviet-type dormitories. The new apartments and apartments in general have amenities such as running water and gas and heating. *Khrushchevka* apartments deserve special attention here. *Khrushchevka* are five-story apartment blocks built during Nikita Khrushchev's campaign to build cheap mass housing starting in 1950s, with standardized designs and usually with small bathrooms and kitchens. A *vremianka* is a

[10] Retrieved 1 June 2015 from http://egov.kz/wps/portal/Content?contentPath=/egovcontent/citizens/tax_finance/taxation/article/nalogi_za_arendu&lang=ru#

[11] Retrieved 3 June 2015 from https://sk.kz/mobile/read_news/456 2010.

substandard, private dwelling built with poor quality materials like mud bricks, for instance. *Vremianka* housing resembles a "village" mode of life with outdoor toilets. This is the cheapest renting option and poorer *priezzhie*, like workers in the construction sector, live in *vremiankas* with no running water or other amenities. Subsistence farming in city gardens or small plots is usually situated next to *vremiankas*. There is a stigma of poverty associated with such dwellings, and in Astana, the government has made it illegal to keep livestock in center city properties (Alexander and Buchli 2007). Finally, there are informal settlements, which are mostly located on the edges of Astana, containing houses made from mud bricks. One goal of the city municipality was to get rid of these types of private dwellings, which "spoiled" Astana's new look. For the officials, it was unharmonious that in the city center, one found substandard, mud brick houses, which were antithesis of what constituted "modern" and world standard. In fact, during my visits to Astana, I witnessed how the city administration put two-meter high walls in front of the houses along streets still dominated by *vremianka*-type old houses. On the surface of the walls, pictures of future construction projects that would replace the old houses were posted.

This is how Alima, one of my roommates, described her initial renting experience in Astana:

> Shocking! Nightmare!! [laughs]. It was a three-room apartment, and each room was rented out. In one room, there were three people living, in the second one, four, and the third, I was renting with another girl. So all in all it was nine people sharing an old-three room *Khrushchevka* apartment. It was on the fifth floor. The kitchen was so small that I felt like I was living in a dormitory. Of course, I was shocked! Well, I stayed three months there; the landlord decided to kick us all out and rent out to families rather than to singles like us. Then I had only one day to find a new place. So I found a place in a two-room apartment. I shared a room with three other girls and the owner of the apartment lived with his family in the other room. I lived there for two years. It seems so terrible now when I think about how I lived then.

For Astana, it is rather typical to experience initial shock with renting; it serves as an 'entrance' point, as well as an early adjustment period, for many renters. When Alima was working for a bank she could afford to rent a single room for herself, but she chose not to do

so. Similarly, other newcomers who could afford to rent better housing preferred to rent shared rooms, or even just a "bed" space. Despite the initial shock with renting conditions, many got used to living in crowded apartments. Since she did not know the city well then, Alima took the first apartment that was available upon her arrival. The next day she had to go to work. Alima changed apartments and roommates many times in Astana. Alima, who during my field research, was sharing a two-room apartment with five other people considered her current situation better than it had been two years previously. After all, the apartment we were renting was new and spacious, and the rent was affordable, due to the number of subtenants. Alima and my other roommates avoided renting in *Khrushchevkas* or dormitories. Many avoided renting old Soviet-type housing and instead opted for newer apartments. Those who lived in dormitories justified it as a temporary, cheaper option until they found something better. It was degrading to live in such conditions, when one could everywhere see new European-style, modern apartment blocks with spacious balconies and kitchens, ready to be sold or rented out. Bissenova too claims that the conspicuous display of new luxurious housing in Astana, unimaginable under socialism, intensified feelings of deprivation for those who still had to live in old, *Khrushchevka* apartments (2012: 71–77).

Nazgul from Turkestan city, a young woman who had lived in Astana over one year when I interviewed her, was critical of the bad renting conditions and how expensive even low-quality housing was:

> Some people live in these Soviet dormitories [*obshezhit'ye*], old ones. It is dirty and damp in the hallways. I was visiting a friend of mine who lives in one. It was one room with a bathroom and a shower in the same room. All the rooms are like this. Two people usually share this one room. Some live with their families in such a room. I don't like this. Because Astana is the capital, after all, with so many new buildings, and still one sees such housing conditions. And they pay a lot, 20,000 Tenge [$130], for this room. What can you do? they found such a place…My friend makes light of it. But I would not live in such a place and would not accept living in such conditions. Working hard and earning only 45,000–65,000 Tenge [$300–$450, the average salary in Astana in the service sector at that time], I would not give 20,000 Tenge for such a room?! It is a big shortcoming in Astana. If this place were renovated and looked clean, I would not mind paying these 20,000 Tenge. Well, my friend will not live in this stinky dormitory forever. It is just for the time being.

Many people who rented agreed that in their hometowns or villages, such living conditions would be imaginable and unacceptable for them. As Nazgul pointed out, many pay higher rents compared to what they would pay at home, but received poorer quality housing, as with the old, run-down dormitories in Astana. These dormitories were located in old Soviet buildings that need urgent repairs, but these were not performed. Instead, the rooms were rented out at market prices. The longer the newcomers stayed in Astana in such conditions, the more likely they were to accept their situation as 'normal.' With time, such communal living became largely accepted as a legitimate way to cope with expensive housing in the capital, however, only temporarily. It was 'normal' even for those who were highly dissatisfied with their rentals. Alima justified this mode of living for newcomers, "Yes, you have to rent here, but I don't think it is a big minus. I had no other choice. It is just part of living in Astana because it is the capital and therefore acceptable until you have your own housing. So I find it acceptable."

The majority of renters were single people, like Alima, or married couples in their early 20s and 30s. Couples would also rent rooms in a shared apartment, but live alone in a single room. I was told stories of four-room apartments with four couples, one living in each room, sometimes with their small children. Not only students and recent university graduates had to rent but also adults who worked full time. I met a middle-aged single mother, who moved from Qostanai to Astana eight years prior and lived in *vremianka*, which she referred to as living "on the bare ground." "My main problem is housing, I pay to rent a room. Renting is too expensive. Right now, I live on the bare ground [na zemle]. There is no running water, no amenities, there is nothing. But I still pay 20,000 Tenge for this vremianka [about $130]." Many newcomers saw renting as a "necessary evil" of coping with a new urban space. However, often this temporary housing solution extended into many years with no prospects for improvement, as described later in this chapter.

Even so, despite the instability of rents and vulnerability to eviction, renting also offered tenants plenty of flexibility to return to Astana at any time, after short breaks back in their hometowns or villages. Since there were no tenant agreements, one was not obliged to stay until the end of an agreed-upon renting period. For instance, the subtenants in our shared apartment included two female medical students, who studied at the same institution. These girls were taking their final exams and moved out right afterwards, just a few weeks after I moved in. They went back to their hometowns during the summer holidays. Over the next several days, Dilnaz looked for replacements and took in two more subtenants. The two new young women in their mid-twenties worked in the administration of a local university. However, they too left after staying only one month, opting to spend their holidays in their home region and not pay rent during their absence. One roommate, who was unemployed, likewise left the city, but came back after a few months to try her luck again. Dilnaz's decision-making process to choose subtenants was quick and seemed to be based on the principle of "first come, first served." She relied on her judgment about who would fit in, and in cases of conflict, she asked people to leave. In this way, Dilnaz had plenty of experience choosing and replacing subtenants on a regular basis. Sharing apartments in this way reduced the costs of accommodation significantly, which is why those with no stable incomes could afford to stay in the city and leave it temporarily, only to come back later.

While my stay in the apartment for three months proved to be very hectic and exhausting, it was also rich and exciting, as new roommates moved in, while old ones moved out. Complete strangers joined us and shared their lives, sometimes for a month or even less. The social life was rich in our shared apartment, but also tense. Each of us had to show considerable flexibility to accommodate the interests and needs of her other roommates. Nonetheless, conflicts between subtenants occurred frequently and moving from one shared apartment to another was common. For instance, my roommates had conflicts about not cleaning the apartment or washing the dishes. Sometimes, forgetting to buy toilet paper could

lead to conflict. Some came home late at night and made noise, thus waking up others, which was unavoidable due to the sharing of rooms and even beds. Minor issues like these could then escalate to bigger problems. There was no private space. There was little opportunity to invite friends over or to spend time alone with one's boyfriend or a female friend at home. Because of this, to enjoy some privacy my roommates usually left the apartment. This lack of privacy and the constant need to adjust one's needs to the preferences of others were the major negative qualities of shared apartments. Consequently, the first thing my roommates would ask about a potential boyfriend or husband in Astana was his housing situation. If the man had his own apartment, that was good reason to date him and eventually marry. Women who had their apartments were likewise desirable marriage partners for men. As one young Kazakh woman told me, local boys could only offer to take her for a romantic walk, holding hands in the shiny Left Bank, but could not take her to their place because there was simply no privacy in their shared apartments. This situation, in turn, put a burden on men in Astana not only to have enough money to entertain their girlfriends, but also to find affordable accommodation so as to date or marry.

On the positive side, shared apartments functioned like a family where mutual support and help was often granted. The 'moving renters' not only remained flexible in terms of housing arrangements, but also cultivated a new urban sociality and sense of community among renters. Dilnaz helped me prolong my migration visa in Astana and her work contacts were very helpful. Likewise, she helped other roommates obtain a registration [*propiska*]. Such short-term, small favors were usually performed for a small fee. Some sort of reciprocity was expected. For instance, Dilnaz later asked me to help her improve her English skills. Although socializing among tenants occurred, its character was superficial and fleeting. But it also gave renters a sense of freedom and lightness to enjoy socializing without the usual burdens of much obligation and commitment. It was common to see my roommates sitting, chatting, and drinking tea together in the kitchen or watching TV shows in the evenings.

Friendships were made and mutual support was common. My roommates lent money to those in need, although these were usually small amounts. Sometimes, they went to cafes or bars together. In addition, new friendships could turn to important new contacts, which proved crucial for gaining employment or eventually finding better accommodation. This community-like socializing was, however, more typical for young single people living together; for families and the elderly, the picture was different, as described later in this chapter.

Crowded and, what tenants called 'shocking,' renting conditions were being integrated into Astana's conflicting and contradictory urban space. My informants began their interviews with me by praising Astana, its new modern look, shiny skyscrapers, shopping malls, and ongoing construction, and then complained about lack of affordable housing, the difficulty of obtaining a *propiska*, and the low salaries. At times, it seemed they were talking about two different cities. These two realities were happening independently of each other. But this only intensified newcomers' desire to acquire new apartments, cars, clothing, as can be observed by the frantic trend of taking out loans from banks, high interest rates notwithstanding. I found the concept of hypercity helpful for understanding these contradictions. The city combines excesses as well as deprivations for its new residents, where both are seen as acceptable and justified in hyper-Astana.

The concept of *hyperreality* (Baudrillard 1993, 1994 and Umberto Eco 1998, cited in Nas and Samuels 2006) refers to the spreading of images in our post-modern, mediatized daily lives, which cease to be reflections of reality; they become instead simulacra with no relation to reality. Accordingly, simulations, representation, fantasy, and images become more real than reality. In *Hypercity: The Symbolic Side of Urbanism*, Peter J. M. Nas and Annemarie Samuels apply the notion of hyperreality to cities and use the concept of hypercity as "a new encompassing theoretical framework which regards urban symbolism starting from ideas, images and representations of the city" (2006: 2). As a hypercity, the symbolic meaning

of Astana's discourse as a "city of the future" is about progress, modernity, and development. I argue that Astana is an example of successful hypercity because its residents, locals, and newcomers likewise endorse its symbolic meaning; one observes an obsession with the image of the city of the future, such that newcomers aim to lift up this hyper-Astana. Consequently, the realities of renting conditions become divorced from the beautiful image of Astana, according to which *priezzhie* associate Astana with progress and development first and foremost. Thus, in a hypercity, the entirety of urban symbols create a reality that becomes more real than the city itself (ibid.: 8). Along thess lines, only the hyper image is recognized as the real "Astana," while other aspects of the city, which constitute the richness and diversity of social reality, are effectively denied (Laszczkowski 2012). Laszczkowski discusses the production of the image of Astana through the displacement and decontextualization of buildings (ibid.). Images of Bayterek and other new buildings are reproduced in propaganda visuals in the streets of Astana, but only a limited selection are featured in the posters, creating a distorted panorama. "They convey an image of a pure city of perfect design." (ibid., 84) On national TV and in the national media, one sees these selected new buildings. For many residents, Astana becomes a collection of these displaced new buildings, which create their own reality. The Left bank is hyperreal, simultaneously "real and imagined" (Soja 1996,, cited in Laszczkowski 2011: 85). Even more evocative of this desire not to see the 'other' reality is the homeowners living in a newly built apartment block, who wished that *Khrushchevka* buildings would disappear from their sight, since they spoiled the view; the old buildings were unwanted reminders of the discrepancies existing in the city (Bissenova 2012: 70–71). Similarly, the newly affluent pretend not to see the poor *priezzhie* in Astana and to ignore their problems (ibid.).

Hyper-Astana manifests itself as representing "other places," as discussed above. Concretely, this means that *priezzhie* compared Astana to exotic foreign locations and attached a special status to the capital. Astana's built materiality and architectural diversity

was especially attractive and seductive to young people like Alima. Strolling among buildings built from shiny glass, she and others felt involuntary placed in another time and place and associations with distant, familiar and unfamiliar places overcame them. Taking walks on the Left Bank or visiting shopping malls offered direct participation in the hyperreal Astana lifestyle, mostly through imagining distant places. The headquarters of the national oil and gas company, KazMunayGaz, with its shiny brown glass façade created this feeling of displacement in Alima, "I like the KazMunayGaz building. The moment I saw it I fell in love with it! Especially when taking a ride during the night over the bridge, I am reminded of Moscow, for some reason. As if for a moment, I were suddenly in Moscow."

The most recent addition to other extravagant construction projects, the giant 'Khan Shatyr' tent was yet another shopping and entertainment center on the Left Bank. Alima was likewise enchanted by it:

> I was in Khan Shatyr last week. It is different! You feel as if you are in Dubai. Yes, more like being in the East, somewhere far away and not in Kazakhstan. I liked everything there. It is so different, as if you were entering some other country. It has everything inside, swings and entertainment for children. I was there with my friend and we wanted to try the new rides there. It is also green and there is air conditioning. You have shops, cinema, and bars where you can sit with friends and relax. There is not only shops there like other shopping malls. You can also just sit and chill and hide in one of its corners with your boyfriend.

The open spaces of these shopping "heavens" contrasted sharply with the crowded living conditions of many *priezzhie*. Indeed, shopping was irrelevant for Alima, which she could not afford anyway at that moment, but the atmosphere, the decoration, and interior design that reminded her of some place other than Kazakhstan. These spaces offered firsthand experience of how it would feel to gain access to such modern and desirable places. Alima was proud to live in such a modern [*sovremennyi*] capital. Notions of *sovremennyi* meaning 'modern,' or 'contemporary' came up often in conversations in which residents and newcomers described Astana. New architectural ensembles were seen as resembling different architectural designs and buildings elsewhere. Europe often served as a referent, but other places such as Japan,

Singapore, and Dubai were mentioned too in both everyday and official rhetoric. Indeed, even other cities, such as Alima's hometown, belonged to the 'past,' meaning lagging behind in development while Astana's Left Bank and shopping malls represented 'abroad,' a desired future, which not yet grasped in Kazakhstan in general, but already highly visible in Astana. When I asked if Astana represented Kazakhstan as a whole, Alima responded, "Well, Astana is like the orientation towards which we are heading, and how we want to develop. Of course, when looking at Astana, one thinks, "Wow, everyone is rich here." But other cities might accurately show how most Kazakhstanis actually live."

But Alima justified the way Astana was by claiming that other countries also invest much more in their capitals than in the rest of their territories and that the capital is not representative of a given country anyway. In this way, Kazakhstan was in principle not that different from other states in the global arena. She said, "Astana is Astana! It is unique. There is no other city like Astana in Kazakhstan! I haven't travelled much abroad, but I think Astana is not like any other city. No other city in Kazakhstan has so many new buildings like Astana. And they are all interesting, like Baiterek, the Pyramid, and others. Only in Astana can you find them!"

Alima could still claim the prestige and status of living in the dynamic capital, regardless of her difficult current material conditions:

> Because it is the capital! When you go to other places you say, "I come from the capital!" It sounds different than saying you are from a provincial town. It is Kazakhstan's business card. Ambassadors from other republics come here. They show them Baiterek and Pyramid buildings. That's why one needs to protect the city and care for it, it is self evident! I am not ashamed of Kazakhstan!

Consequently, in spite of complaining, many renters justified the high rents as appropriate for the country's capital city, that possesed the heterotopic qualities of 'other' exclusive places. As one of my roommates, Gulmira, put it bluntly:

> Astana is simply *the* capital! And I believe that every other capital in the world is like this. First of all, as the capital, it has to be different from other cities in the country.

> Secondly, people have totally different attitudes towards the capital. I mean views and values vary, despite being in one and the same country. The capital status similarly affects prices for food and clothing, as well as for housing. In short, everything is going to be more expensive in the capital. It is not just any city, it has the status of the capital…But it is the capital, of course they spend money on it.

In fact, not only rents, but almost everything was more expensive in Astana, compared to other cities. In addition to housing, the most striking example was university fees, which were double what they were in neighboring towns such as Karaganda. Some informants mentioned that even basic goods such as food and clothing were cheaper in neighboring towns, where they occasionally went to shop. These higher prices were presented as universally accepted norms because capitals must be privileged as a 'business card' for the whole country.

A feeling of unease about ignoring the city's problems and the "other" not-so-shiny parts of the capital become apparent too. Many places in Astana's old town still called the recent Soviet past to mind, with their old infrastructure and dilapidated *Khrushchev* apartments. The growth of the city was not visible everywhere; the difference became especially striking on the outskirts. Next to the hustling bazaar areas, where many people went to shop for basic food and clothing, one felt a stark contrast with the Left Bank. As Alima remarked, she had the strange feeling that the architecture of the Left Bank was so dramatically different from the old town that it was hard to imagine it all existed in Astana simultaneously and in fact just on the other side of the Ishim River. The bazaar area was a reminder of the 'old' Kazakhstan, while the Left Bank was the 'new' Kazakhstan. The two realities of Astana, existing next to each other, overlapping and blurring the boundaries between reality and fantasy, made Astana as a whole real and imaginary at the same time (Soja 1996).

Alima's everyday life was at a disjuncture with the promising architectural luxury of the shopping malls which fit the image of the hypercity. The renting situation reflected this practical reality. As described in the previous chapter, Alima did not see herself as exactly

living the "Astana dream." Her salary was barely enough to cover her rent; she could not afford to go shopping in the new shopping malls, or go out to socialize in bars and cafés without someone paying her way. She felt disconnected from the "Astana dream":

> Well, you know that work and salaries play a big role here. When I was working at the bank, I felt more included in the Astana life and could afford more things. And now I feel restrained by my finances and can't go out often. I simply can't afford it and feel like I am missing out a lot. Of course, I wish I were more actively participating in urban life here.

At times, Alima expressed bitterness that, surrounded by the incredible luxury and diversity that the city offered, she had to worry about public transportation costs. Yet, earnings varied greatly in Astana and she was not giving up hope of finding a proper job. There were people who earned really high salaries and those who barely made ends meet. The latter constituted a majority of *priezzhie* who were renting rooms and beds. The high quality of life in the capital was mostly accessible to those few who could actually afford it. The distance between the elite and ordinary people was not only great, but also like a mystery hidden behind the walls of the elite apartments and the shiny new offices of government workers. The elite were spatially close and yet far from ordinary people. Raima said:

> The way people live in Astana can drastically vary because the contrasts are great. Some people live very poorly; they manage to feed a family for 20,000 Tenge [$130], which I think is unrealistic in Astana. But some other people live very well; they can easily go to a restaurant and pay 70,000 or 80,000 [$450 or $500]. The same is true for young people who can go out to a bar or club and spend this amount in a night. So yes, one can see constant contrasts in ways of living and spending.

Ash Amin invites scholars to look at cities from a relational perspective, where the effects of spatial juxtapositions are evident, as "if cities have become sites of variety and difference placed in closed proximity, but without any necessary linkage between the elements" (Amin 2007: 104). Raima's life drastically differed from those of the new elite in Astana, despite their close spatial proximity. While speaking with me, she was sarcastic about the contrasting lives of the rich in comparison with hers at the moment. But she did not question the Astana project as a whole; it was more about how elite correspondingly lived in

the "city of the future." When encountering the disconnect between the hyper-real Astana and the lived reality, many newcomers were disenchanted. But as Laszczkowski rightly observes, in the end, these critical views do not go beyond the modernization project of the state (2012).

Astana as the "other place" and a hypercity was elevated and evaluated as a special city, where ordinary rules did not apply. Moreover, like with liminal phases there is a temporary suspension of social norms and rules (Turner 1967, Thomassen 2014). Anything becomes acceptable in Astana's liminal urban space. Since eventually Alima also believed that she can achieve the 'Astana dream,' she was ready to wait and survive temporary difficulties. This attitude is apparent in the over-identification by many newcomers with the Astana discourse of modernization, while trying to regard their own problems as transitory. In the meantime, the utopia is effective in the present and serves to justify negative things, such as the high rents and the lack of well-paid jobs as "normal". Difficulties were allowed and tolerated as part of the transition stage, while Astana's positive aspects were emphasized, such as praising Astana as a cosmopolitan and modern, globalized capital, dominated by flow and movement. The city encompassed contradictions and the residents, like Raima, called Astana 'the city of contrasts.' Thus, the negative aspects of life in Astana were not completely ignored, but became part of its liminal quality, which found expression as a heterotopic and a hyper-capital outside usual norms.

Propiska, Registration and Invisibility

Propiska, a mandatory administrative system of registration, was introduced in 1932 in the Soviet Union to control internal migration. A holder of a *propiska* is permitted to work in a given town and reside at the address on the *propiska* (Hatcher and Thieme 2015). This was part of an internal passport system which also guaranteed citizens rights, as the address on the *propiska* showed where a person was entitled to receive social benefits (Turaeva 2012). Every person was registered at a particular address and, in accordance with that registration, he or she was given access to employment, primary and secondary education, healthcare, and

other benefits. Several reasons seem to lie behind the logic of the system of *propiska*. First and foremost, the *propiska* kept rural dwellers 'tied' to the land and prevented them from moving to cities. Beyond this, as an instrument of repression, it kept personae non grata under control and away from the cities. Only later did the *propiska* come to be seen as directly linked to payment of social benefits and access to health care (Morton 1980, cited in Hatcher and Thieme 2015). In the light of the differences between urban spaces and the countryside in terms of living conditions, a city *propiska* was a privilege and hard to obtain. During Soviet times, obtaining a city *propiska* was conditional on receiving housing in the city, which was, in turn, dependent on attaining employment there, which was denied, unless it filled a labor shortage (Hatcher and Thieme 2015: 11). Upon arriving in cities, many people lived with relatives before they could secure employment and housing. Bribing officials to get a *propiska* occurred in the late Soviet period (Buckley 1995, cited in Hatcher and Thieme 2015).

Independent Kazakhstan declared the institution of *propiska* formally unconstitutional and an infringement on citizens' rights to move freely and reside where they wished in the country and replaced it with mandatory registration at one's place of residence [*registratsiya po mestu prozhivania*]. Explaining the difference between the Soviet *propiska* system and the current registration system, Vice-Chair of the Migration Police Department Sainov said that the Soviet propiska had authorizing nature [*razreshitelniy kharakter*], while the current registration has a notificatory nature [*uvedomitelniy kharakter*] (RFE/RL 2012)[12]. The measure was meant to change the restrictive nature of *propiska* to that of a citizen-friendly registration, seen primarily as a person's legal address for contact and planning purposes. Similar changes followed in other former Soviet republics. As Hatcher says, "the former *propiska* system was altered to conform to international best practice (and human rights

[12] Retrieved on 2 August 2012 from http://rus.azattyq.org/content/propiska_mvd_sainov_ergalieva_nazkhanov_baiseitova/24474434.html

legislation) on internal freedom of movement" (2011: 8–9). However, such registration systems could still be abused and work against freedom of movement (ibid.: 6).

Despite the abolishment of the *propiska* system in Kazakhstan, the new administrative system of registration was nothing less than its uncanny reinstatement, which retained most of its old functions. It was now permitted to move freely, but one still had to be registered at a temporary or permanent address. Therefore, it was not surprising that most people continue to call the new system *propiska.* All my informants in Astana referred it as *propiska*. The Population Service Center [*Tsentr Obsluzhivaia Naselenia* (TSON)] is the responsible institution under the Internal Affairs Agency, where citizens must be registered in person and renew their registration accordingly. The process of registration itself is bureaucratically burdensome and applicants have to de-register from the previous address and collect the needed papers related to the new address. Upon moving to a new address, citizens must register themselves at the new address within ten days. The list of required documents can be as many as to ten and includes the applicant's original proof of ownership of the property or a lease, if rented. The landlord must be present at the registration office with the applicant and provide his or her identity documents.[13] Many landlords feel unenthusiastic about such time-consuming procedures and want to avoid paying more utility costs and taxes, and refuse to register their tenants. Based on research in *propiska* in Kyrgyzstan, Hatcher argues that landlords avoid formal tenant agreements to protect their own property rights by making sure tenants remain invisible (2015). Because of the legacy of *propiska*, homeowners are afraid that tenants could claim partial ownership of the property. However, Hatcher claims there was not much legal basis to support these concerns (ibid.).

In short, there was a great deal of confusion about how to navigate the rules surrounding *propiska*. Some of my respondents did not know exactly which documents to supply in order to register. Some never bothered with the official bureaucracy and bought a

[13] Retrieved on 1 February 2014 from http://adilet.zan.kz/rus/docs/V1100007324#z504

fake *propiska* to show to potential employers who demand local registration. *Propiska* is needed to show potential employers, who cannot judge easily if it is fake or not. For employees, it is a formal requirement that they need to fulfill to be hired.

Crucially, those who lack a formal *propiska* are cut off from social security and must pay high prices for services in the private sector. Recent findings on the impact of the registration system regarding access to basic services concludes that, "In Kazakhstan's registration system, there is a direct link between a citizen's registration status and his or her access to basic public services, to the extent that lack of registration often makes this access impossible" (Kotova 2010). Concretely, the report listed barriers to gaining access to "free emergency medical service, daycare and secondary education, welfare benefits, eligibility for civil status documents (passports, identification cards, driving licenses, etc.) employment issues, social and political life" (ibid.). To this unemployment benefits, voting rights, and the ability to obtain bank loans could be added. The extreme example of such exclusion from social benefits are the homeless who cannot provide a registered address anywhere in Kazakhstan (Kotova 2010). Newcomers whose actual address does not correspond with their registered legal address might be still registered in their hometown or village. They need to travel there periodically to receive benefits or to vote (ibid.). Thus, registration becomes a commodity itself, promising access to jobs, security, medical insurance, and other provisions guaranteed by the state.

Since there are no restrictions on registrations being issued in cities in post-Soviet Kazakhstan, the influx of internal migrants in Astana was not restricted or regulated. Because many were skeptical about moving the capital from Almaty, officials were worried that the new capital would not appeal to new residents and hence encouraged people to move by means of higher salaries, promising careers in state bureaucracy, and housing subsidies for those in government and the public sector. This strategy proved successful, and with the construction boom, the new capital attracted not only skilled professionals, but also thousands

of unskilled workers from all over Kazakhstan and beyond, specifically from neighboring Central Asian states. However, most of the *priezzhie* living in rented, shared apartments in Astana were not locally registered. They had to face this problem from the time of their arrival and throughout their stay, if they did not manage to find a solution. Landlords and employers did not offer their tenants and employees any assistance with registration. Almost all my informants cited getting a local *propiska* as a problem. As finely put by one of my respondents, Nurzhan, "Without a *propiska* and your own apartment, you cannot do anything here. These two issues decide everything." Newcomers were frustrated when they could not obtain a *propiska* because, without it, many faced restrictions and difficulties in finding employment and getting access to social benefits. A young woman named Saule explained that she could not work because she had no *propiska.* She said, "Nobody [landlords] wants to give you propiska. Last year, when I lost my passport, I had to buy a propiska valid for three days for 15,000 Tenge [$100] just to apply for a new passport. We bought *propiska* from a private person through a newspaper ad." In this way, most *priezzhie* find a temporary solution, which is to buy a short-term *propiska* from a third party when needed. Property owners agree to register strangers, such as Saule, at their address then de-register them after the agreed period. However, even with a valid registration, there is very little guarantee that the purchaser remains registered for the whole agreed-upon period.

Since their landlords refuse to register them, *priezzhie* with no formal tenant agreements have no other choice than to buy fake *propiski*, showing their residence as someplace else. Valid *propis*ka are available on the open market, but expensive, so many people buy fakes ones. For 5,000 Tenge ($33), in 2009, one could buy a fake *propiska.* The real *propiska* was more expensive as the above example with Saule shows. As Hatcher points out, "This also discredits the very purpose of the registration system: making citizens legible" (2011: 13). In connection to fake and real *propiska*, Reeves, in her research on Central Asian labor migrants in Russia, notes that the trouble begins when migrants presumably buy a real

propiska, but it turns out to be fake when checked by the police. It can be extremely hard to differentiate between 'clean' and 'fake' registrations, since the fake usually looks exactly the same (Reeves 2011). In Astana, I did not hear about a similar problem, as the price of a real *propiska* is much higher than that of a fake one. However, it is possible that some newcomers, who are new and have little life experience, are cheated and buy *propiska* which turn out to be fake. Prices on the open market for *propiska* depend upon whether they are real or fake. The fake *propiska* was a forged one, which does not correspond to any real address and is based on falsified documents. If newcomers have friends or relatives in Astana, they usually get registered at their places of residence but many do not actually live at them. As long as the person is not living at the stated address, the registration is invalid.

In Astana, one sees a large number of advertisements offering *propiska.* Sometimes, such leaflets occupied the entire advertisement board of a bus stop, promising all sorts of arrangements for fake or real *propiska*. Their visual omnipresence was a vital reminder of the demand for *propiska.* Moreover, some homeowners complained that there were additional people registered at their address, without their permission or knowledge. They were surprised when they received utility bills listing the people allegedly registered at their address, according to which utility costs are calculated. These could be either honest mistakes by the administrative staff due to computer failures or purposeful manipulations. Since the demand for *propiska* was particularly high in Astana and Almaty, corruption was widespread, with multiple middle men [*posredniki*] involving even government officials in the supply of *propiska*. For some, it became a source of lucrative illegal business, and a whole market was created to issue real or fake registrations. Almaty introduced restrictions on registration in 2010, which were based on sanitation concerns (RFE/RL 2012). In Almaty, one can only register close relatives if one has $15m^2$ of free space. There, obtaining a valid *propiska* is

especially expensive. Prices can be as high as 150,000 Tenge [$1000] for a year, or 70,000 Tenge for a half year.[14]

The authorities were aware of the problem and undertook efforts to eradicate the illegal *propiska* market. In 2007, they attempted to simplify the registration process by including additional types of housing, such as dormitories, resort housing, hotels, *dachas* [summer houses] and, most significantly, place of employment, as legitimate places of registration.[15] Previously, citizens could only register at residential dwellings, such as private houses or apartments. The problem was that not all dwellings were valid as legal addresses for registration, which created problems for residents in the informal settlements living in houses of mud bricks. These were not recognized as meeting the quality and safety standards of construction (Kotova 2010). However, the greater leniency in types of housing resulted in a tightening of registration rules. Since 2011, those who failed to register within ten days or lived without a registration for longer than three months were subject to administrative fines of 10,000 Tenge ($55), with a warning issued before three months by the Ministry of Internal Affairs (RFE/RL 2012). In 2010, about 140,000 Kazakhstan citizens were fined for violating registration rules (ibid.). The latest amendments to the law on *propiska* took force on January 1, 2015. They stipulate that not only residents living without registration will be fined, but also homeowners who agree to register multiple people at their properties (ibid.). Officials recognize that a large number of internal migrants in large cities are living not where they are registered or have altogether fake registrations. Officials want to avoid such cases where twenty or more people could be allegedly registered at one and the same address. It is obvious that these people do not live there. Such practices are now punishable. The authorities are eager to curtail the flourishing of the black market in *propiska* and to stop landlords from

[14] Retrieved on 16 January 2015 from http://pravo.zakon.kz/4597480-v-almaty-propiska-prevratilas-v.html
[15] Retrieved on 15 Februrary 2015 from http://www.uchet.kz/news/detail.php?EID=10965

subletting their property without tenant agreements and thus avoiding paying taxes on additional income.[16]

Homeowners face no barriers to obtaining registration at their place of residence. Property rights play an important role in the registration system. As Hatcher (2011) states, non-homeowners are discriminated when it comes to *propiska*. Newcomers who purchase property can easily obtain registration by showing their bill of sale. In this, locals like my roommate Dilnaz, a *mestnyi* [local], also had no problems obtaining a local propiska. She was born and grew up in pre-capital Tselinograd. When Dilnaz started working and earning a regular salary, she no longer wished to live with her mother and opted to rent a place in a shared apartment like the newcomers, to enjoy more freedom. Formally, she was registered at the apartment of her mother, a longtime resident in Astana. Having a valid local propiska gave Dilnaz a number of advantages over newcomers, such as having a well-paid job at the local court and the ability to gain a local landlord's trust more easily.

As described above, people who owned several properties could make a substantial profit from unofficially letting their properties to multiple tenants. By tightening the registration rules, officials attempted to create a transparent database with accurate data on population movement and to make landlords pay taxes on earnings from their rental business. Nonetheless, the new restrictions give officials, and especially the police more power, which could be used to extort bribes and thus barely help to bring the *propiska* business or the rental market out of the informal sector. Beginning in 2015, authorities sought to create an electronic database to keep track of registration. The idea was that after implementation, the police could make visits to addresses to check if those registered actually lived there. Human rights activists rightly express concern that Kazakhstan is reviving the restrictive nature of *propiska* by creating more rules, which de facto restrict movement of the population.

[16] Retrieved on 2 March 2015 from http://www.zakon.kz/4676792-s-1-janvarja-nachnut-shtrafovat-za.html

The private rental market was likely to keep growing as homeownership was hardly affordable for thousands of newcomers, especially those from poor, rural regions. It was unlikely that the landlords would officially be allowed to rent a two-room apartment to seven persons (as was the case in our shared apartment). If landlords agreed to written leases with fewer persons and allowed their tenants to register, then rental prices could increase, which would make housing even more expensive for newcomers. As the practice of renting space in shared apartments shows, not only landlords but also tenants might not be interested in having formal tenant agreements because they enjoy the freedom from obligations. Many newcomers move out any time they wish, since they do not have to pay any deposits. If they had leases, the practice of frequently changing apartments would no longer be possible. At the same time, if leases were instated, tenants would enjoy better tenant rights and be protected from eviction, and most importantly, could have access to valid *propiska* and thus to social benefits.

Despite the benefits of a valid *propiska*, many citizens remain skeptical that new *propiska* rules will create more transparency on the rental market. For instance, registration at work is intended to simplify registration, but those who come to cities in search of work have to find work first (RFE/RL 2012). Even if employers agree to register newcomers at their place of work, they continue to live someplace else, as is the case with Ainagul, "I have no real *propiska.* I just have a temporary registration at the university dormitory, but I don't live there. They [the university] got me *propisk*a for the dormitory and with that I can work here. My actual place where I rent a room does not give *propiska*. I don't know why." Even if people are allowed to register at their place of work, there is no obligation for employers to provide a *propiska* for their employees. Many newcomers have no stable income since they work either at temporary jobs or are employed unofficially, which is often the case for unskilled laborers. Many administrative details remain unclear and critical assessments of the new measures regarding the mandatory registration are necessary.

Elderly and Renting: Becoming "Homeless"

Renting conditions were tolerable for younger generation who are unstable in their social status, but similar experiences became a stigma for elderly newcomers. Renting increased not only feelings of material deprivation, compared to those in the new elite housing compounds, but also deprivation of symbolic status. As Miller observes, "consumption is central to the creation of culture, since it involves a process of objectification which enables material things and their discourses to become forms through which people have consciousness of themselves" (1994: 66, cited in Humphrey 2002: 176). Being a tenant was acceptable only as a transitory stage, seen as a temporary solution to lack of homeownership. The transitory state became apparent when examining the renting experiences of the elderly in Astana, as the following story with Ainagul shows. When renting, the elderly saw themselves as 'homeless.'

Ainagul, a woman in her 50s, who came from the small town of Arkalyk to Astana four years before I met her with her husband and four adult children, still struggled with paying high rent. When I met Ainagul, she was working as security staff at one of the local university libraries. She said:

> We thought that we would get an apartment, a *propiska*, and that we would have our own home. We have lived here for four years now and still rent a place. We can't even dare to dream about getting an apartment because none of us works for the government or in the public sector. My children were not able to attend university. I am already at pre-retirement age, no chance. All the apartments are expensive. I rent a place here not far from work. I walk to work. We pay a huge amount of money in rent. Too expensive, just too expensive here! Our salary is small. We came because of the construction. We thought there is work here and that there will be housing since they [the government] are building houses, but not everyone can afford them. People thought, 'Wow, construction! And we will also get housing.' Young people and young families had high hopes. But it is not easy. Those who had money bought houses, or took apartments on *ipoteka*….We are now barely surviving here. What can you do?! We eat up what we earn and still I cannot afford to eat meat. Very rarely do I eat meat. And my situation now – I have no home, nothing, I am homeless, to put it briefly. At the age of 52, I am left without a home.

Ainagul belongs to a new marginalized group who consider themselves 'homeless.' Moving to Astana was traumatic for this elderly woman, since she had to endure a complicated surgery during which her husband left her for a much younger woman, who had her own apartment. In addition, when Ainagul was sick she was fired from her job at an expensive restaurant and was replaced by a younger woman. An elderly person is especially disadvantaged on the job market for semi-skilled and unskilled labor, since she is discriminated against due to her age. Many employers in the low-paid service sector prefer young people who do not complain about bad conditions or delayed paychecks.[17] Ainagul was alone with no home and no husband when I met her in 2009. Luckily, her children helped her pay for the surgery. Ainagul also could not go back to her hometown where she had a home:

> Our home in Arkalyk is empty and in ruins; no one will buy it since there is no work there. When we were away, our neighbors stole everything from our house. It is empty, even the windows and doors have been taken away. Who is going to buy it?! And my husband left me for a young woman two years ago here…My husband could not endure all these difficulties with moving to Astana; we were sometimes changing apartments every month because of a bad landlord, or something else. Sometimes there was no running water or heat. He could not take it anymore and found a younger woman with an apartment and left me. We have four children and had lived 35 years together!! Can you imagine?! Now I rent a room alone for 20,000 Tenge, [$130], and my salary is 30,000 Tenge. Astana is a very expensive city. Expensive!! If I had my husband, it would not be as bad, but alone it is hard to get by. Still, I try not to ask money from my kids. I rely on myself. It is hard for my children too. They also rent rooms here in *vremiankas.*

The financially unstable situation of Ainagul was sad. She made jokes about her husband leaving her; being ironic was perhaps a way of consoling herself. She was bitterly disappointed in her life in Astana. Not having enough money for public transport, she walked every day to work. Except for her children, her relatives never visited her. Her relatives stayed in contact with her ex-husband though. She rented a room with other subtenants in a shared

[17] Several informants told me stories of being cheated by construction companies and not receiving their earnings for several months or being paid less than they were promised. Due to the financial crisis, many companies were late in paying their workers in 2008 and 2009. Sudden dismissals of employees were widespread.

apartment. But besides sharing a common kitchen and a bathroom, they were strangers to each other and communicated little. The other subtenants were young families and had not much in common with Ainagul. Ainagul's four children were all married and lived separately in Astana, each renting rooms.

Ainagul's situation was precarious and she was often short of money, paying more than 60% of her salary for rent. Astana's income inequalities have produced lavish, villa lifestyles, on the one hand, and those like Ainagul's, who did not have enough money to cover her basic needs, on the other. Ainagul often had to borrow money.

> Astana is good for those who have money, big money, and who has this money? Of course government workers [*chinovniki*]! They have a good time in Astana. They think about where to go and have fun, how to spend their free time. And we, simple people, from our salaries we pay the rent, and the rest is for survival. It is not enough for anything…I manage by taking my gold necklace to the pawn shop[18] to borrow cash when I am out if money. It is my savior. I leave my golden necklace for a month to borrow cash and when I get my salary I get my necklace back. So that's how it is. There are many people who do the same. When they need cash, they bring their gold jewelry and borrow money. Where else can you get cash quickly? I try not to ask my kids. They have small children and need money. So yes, government workers live well. And they are the ones who get the apartments. They drive around in new cars, and we count every penny.

Renting means that one cannot do renovations [*remont*], purchase new furniture, and invest making a 'home.' Homeownership is more than just a status symbol. After a successful purchase, the owner invites guests and shows them all the renovations done to the new apartment. The guests carefully judge the design, furniture, kitchen, and whether it all meets the new standards for being modern and up to date (Bissenova 2012: 134). Relatives impatiently wait to be invited to celebrate the occasion of a home purchase or the completion of the construction of a house. After such a celebration, the owner is regarded as a dignified member of the family network. Those who do not own homes do not enjoy the same respect in the extended family. Homeownership as the symbol of adulthood, maturity, stability, a place where a family can raise children, is even more pronounced for those who have to rent.

[18] Going to a pawn shop is a last resort. People pawn their gold rings and other jewelry for cash, and afterwards they buy back their valuables.

Hence, investment in housing is psychologically comforting, especially after having endured the permanent housing shortages of the Soviet Union (Alexander and Buchli 2007). In Kazakhstan, no one can imagine renting housing for their lifetime, since it is simply too expensive. As Bissenova also points out, housing is crucial in Kazakhstan "to maintain[ing] one's identity, privacy, and social status" (2012: 134). The elderly and middle-aged newcomers who want to start a new life in Astana faced negative judgment by their families, if they failed to obtain housing after a certain period renting.

Similarly to the elderly, those who moved to Astana with families, and especially young children, could not accept renting as a long term solution. Thus, it is not surprising that many felt like they were living "on the streets." A man in this late 30s, Ulan, had come from the southern city Chimkent to Astana three years before I met him. He lived with his wife and two children in one room in a dormitory. He had a university degree in chemistry and had worked as a research expert in Chimkent, receiving a salary of 20,000 Tenge ($130) per month. In Astana, he sold mobile phones in a shopping center, where he earned three or four times more than he had in his previous job. His wife was at home, looking after the two children. Ulan was the only one working and paying the rent. He said:

> You see 90% percent of young families are without housing here, they are 'on the streets,' renting rooms. We too first rented a room in the outskirts in a *vremianka* with no running water, and slowly we moved to the city, and now we live in city center…We are not hoping to get a free apartment. We want to buy one at an affordable price. Now they are too expensive. Monthly mortgage payments are 100,000 or 120,000 Tenge at the moment, which is unrealistic. That's almost $1,000 dollars. I could pay a mortgage in Moscow for this money. Here, the prices are artificially high and not realistic. Well, where would I find, for instance, $120,000 to buy an apartment? I can work all my life and still not be able to save this much. Not only me, you see all the others here, no one can. [Pause]. In Paris one can buy an apartment for $500,000 and in Astana one can buy an apartment for $500,000 dollars. I would rather buy one in Paris than in Astana if I had this money. Don't you agree?

Nonetheless, he said:

> Yes, of course I like living in Astana, I like the city. But, last year was difficult for us too. We wanted to leave Astana for good. I wasn't even making enough money to pay rent. I took a loan out from the bank and was paying my debts with it. Sales went down, business was bad. But now it is more or less OK. There is no guarantee

> anywhere that everything will be great. There is no 'easy bread' [onoy jerde nan jok]. [Pause]. Yes, I like the Left Bank, very much in fact. Well, there is future, a big future in Astana. But I cannot say anything about my future. I will stay here if I manage to buy an apartment. Astana is the most successful city in Kazakhstan. At least, I think and hope so. As the capital the city has gained recognition!

It is clear that Astana's bright future does not depend on the well-being or success of particular individuals. It is irrelevant even if the majority of newcomers like Ulan are barely surviving. He, in turn, was working hard, making for the moment just enough to cover his living expenses and rent, but he could not save any money to purchase a home in the near future. He intended to wait a few years and, if his financial situation did not improve, he said he would go back to his hometown where he already had a small apartment. He was trying out life in Astana. But with his two children growing up, they could no longer live in one room. Renting an apartment for a longer period with children was not an option. Ulan could not afford to pay rent for a larger apartment. For families and the elderly, an extended 'waiting period' without the prospect of acquiring housing thus becomes an undesired liminality. No longer desired, liminality can produce feelings of imprisonment. Thus, Ulan contemplated leaving Astana the previous year. He was afraid to be *just* working to pay rent and make ends meet. He decided to stay longer and keep trying his luck for a few years. Here, the negative qualities of liminal renting become all too apparent.

Marjan, a young single woman, lived in a three-room shared apartment, a situation similar to that of Alima. Marjan was under pressure from her parents and relatives to marry and have children. At age 29, she too considered it was time to have children. However, Marjan's family planning depended on whether her future husband or the state could secure housing for her. She was in no position to save money or buy housing with her salary. Marjan told me:

> These apartments are very expensive and at this moment I cannot afford to buy such an apartment. For example, as a resident of Kazakhstan, I came from Taraz to Astana and live here in my own country and have to rent. I get angry about it! Why can't the government give me an apartment?! And Nazarbayev keeps saying that we need to

> multiply, give birth, and produce more children! But where should I give birth if I don't have my own apartment?! If only Nazarbayev gave me even a stinky dormitory, I would give birth to two even three children right away! At least a dormitory! Even a dormitory Nazarbayev does not give me. Where should I give birth?!

Dormitory-type of housing with single rooms was the only option for many young couples during Soviet times, when recent university graduates were sent to work in different regions of the country. This was one of the ways the Soviet Union tried to solve the housing shortage. Seen as a temporary arrangement, it offered private space for young couples and was a realistic option for many. Marjan's appeal for an apartment from the state strongly resonates with a Soviet sense of entitlement with regard to housing, according to which receiving at least a dormitory room was considered a "right," distributed mostly to members of the working class (Stronski 2010). In addition, mothers who gave birth to a certain number of children were rewarded with housing or special payments under the USSR's generous support for women. This was no longer available in independent Kazakhstan. President Nazarbayev embodied that state. Hence, Marjan directly appeal to him. Many regarded the president as a benevolent father figure who could directly give orders that would then be immediately implemented. Nazarbayev in this sense was comparable to Atatürk in Turkey (Koch 2012). Although Marjan sounded serious, it was clear that her appeal to the president was unrealistic and she was ultimately sarcastic about her housing situation. But she was serious about expressing disempowerment and outrage with injustices surrounding the housing situation. Marjan's use of humor, while simultaneously being serious about overpriced housing and renting conditions, is similar to how Soviet citizens reacted to feeling disempowered (Yurchak 2006). Yurchak discusses the self-directed irony of marginalized Soviet citizens, who despite being outraged by the system, found meaningful ways to identify with and be attached to it. For singles, renting is tolerable, but to start a family without one's own home is difficult and, without help from parents or relatives, almost impossible. Thus, for single women who were waiting to get married or wanting to give birth, the availability of housing

was a deciding factor. If a young couple secured housing, then they were likely to stay in Astana.

Renting in Astana was seen only appropriate for young people while they get an education, find work, and potential spouses. Whereas the younger generation embraced the 'uniqueness' of the city and the freedoms it offered, the older generation felt lost and unable to manage frequent changes of apartments and roommates. When renting a room in a shared apartment, the elderly were unable to have guests or invite their relatives to visit because of lack of space. They felt ashamed about their housing situation. Consequently, for the elderly, a liminal stage associated with renting disrupted their entire social status. Likewise, families who moved to Astana with children or wanted to have children faced similar problems in the long term. No one wishes to stay in 'transition' forever, as the ultimate goal is stability and fixity, rather than constant movement. Permanent housing was vital for people to feel like worthy members of society who deserve respect. Without owning a home, one was 'homeless,' as acutely felt by my informant. As Thomassen argues, without proper re-integration liminality is dangerous, since it can lead to feelings of alienation and a loss of home (2012: 30).

Conclusion: Liminal Housing

In many cities in developing countries, a large proportion of the urban population relies on renting, as it allows them to move to cities temporarily in search of work or better prospects. However, it is not only low-income groups that benefit from renting (Dübel et al. 2006, cited in Hatcher 2015). Similarly, newcomers, especially the young and mobile, in Astana who could not purchase housing depended upon the rental market, which allowed them to be flexible while pursuing their study or career goals. The younger generation cherished the freedoms they experienced while renting, because it was only a temporary stage until they settled down and built social networks after obtaining housing. As described, renting conditions in Astana were especially crowded and expensive, but this did not stop the

flow of newcomers settling in the new capital. Many of them were driven by the desire for homeownership in the new capital. Homeownership was part of the 'Astana dream' connected with hope in the "city of the future." As Bissenova vividly describes, purchasing or upgrading one's housing has become a number one priority for the aspiring middle class in Astana. "[N]ew apartment buildings become part of the image and picture of a 'beautiful life' and a "must have" (2012: 121). But, housing is a domain of life in Astana where dream and reality often clash so directly and severely that it becomes clear how unattainable the dream is.

Flexible and mobile tenants made up an army of renters in Astana. Being unstable, vulnerable, and frequently changing places of residence, they, nevertheless, refused to leave Astana. Mostly working in the unstable private and service sectors, their livelihoods were insecure. Many of my interlocutors had been living in Astana for several years, but their mode of living made them neither permanent residents nor newcomers. Hence, they still lived in liminal housing. Moreover, their lack of valid registration [*propiska*] made them 'invisible' and off the books. Most of the time, newcomers had no registration, no proper accommodation, and were constantly searching for better housing, jobs, and even for romantic partners with housing. Thus, facing all sorts of insecurities and instabilities, newcomers were in a constant 'search mode.' Refusing to leave when difficulties arose, many remained in the city and tried even harder to succeed. Whenever their expectations and dreams did not materialize, the only remaining option was to return to their grayish hometown or village where everything stays the same. There was more than just mere rational calculation when considering whether to return to the places they had grown up or stay. Chasing after the Astana dream, individuals like Alima, Ulan and Raima could not leave since that would mean they had abandoned their dreams and all their investments, and the desire to be part of the "city of the future."

The liminal housing experience of newcomers to Astana contains both positive qualities, such as the freedom to move and experiment with new lifestyles, and negative ones,

such as instability, uncertainty, ambiguity, being in a limbo, and having to cope with uncertainty regarding housing. But as Low (2000, 2009) and Massey (1984) argue, the relationship between the spatial and the social is mutually constitutive, meaning that actors are not passive, but actively engage in appropriating urban space. For example, newcomers purchased fake *propiskas* in order to find work and stay in Astana. Moreover, they benefited from the lack of binding tenant agreements, which freed them from paying rent deposits and other obligations. They escaped official statistics, and lived between being permanent residents and temporary guests. Renting enabled young newcomers to remain flexible and develop some autonomy from their parents and extended families.

Yi-Fu Tuan claims that the built environment "has the power to define and refine sensibility" and can also contribute to the clarification of social order (1977, 107). As a successful hypercity, Astana's perfect image is able to exist outside the everyday problems of many *priezzhie,* faced with shocking renting conditions. Renters were inspired by the image of Astana, just as they are stimulated by commercials showing brand-new apartments to want to achieve purchasing one as a goal. Laszczkowski states that against the background of modernization discourse, "the construction of Astana is perceived by many citizens [as]…restor[ing] a cohesive, progressive, and future-oriented social order in which they can see themselves meaningfully and actively engaged" (2011: 78). This signifies the success of hyperreal Astana propagated by official rhetoric. Indeed, newcomers want to be included in Astana's discourse of modernization, connecting their lives with the ambitious aims of the capital. When they face hardships, such as finding housing, newcomers do not discredit or blame Astana for not meeting their expectations. Instead, they try harder and longer to achieve their goal of attaining housing in the future. Disenchantment and disappointment do not spill over to into questioning the Astana construction project as a 'failure,' but rather are incorporated into ideas of living in the new globalized capital, which enjoys special status, and hence allows for discrepancies and contrasts to co-exist.

In the meantime, newcomers found meaningful attachments to the capital as the "city of the future," an extraordinary exotic city, thus far better than other cities in Kazakhstan. Astana in this sense became a special city, a heterotopia, which produced and enabled heterogeneous spaces and meanings. Housing speculation was, in turn, I argued, directly influenced by Astana's heterotopic qualities, making it a special zone, where the usual rules do not apply. Moreover, as a hypercity, Astana's image stands outside the practical realities of daily life. There was the reality of the image of a perfect city and the other reality of shocking renting conditions. However, newcomers did not see these two different realities as discrepancies; they effectively incorporated them, one as part of the other. I argue that these were the qualities of a heterotopic and hyper-Astana with liminal characteristics. When newcomers said something positive about Astana, they referred to its image, to hyper-Astana. When something negative came up in our conversations, such as the shortage of affordable housing and high rents, my respondents would justify these by referring to the special status of Astana. The newcomers accepted their present-day difficulties as part of living in the "other space," where ordinary rules do not apply. As a heterotopia, Astana's built materiality possessed qualities of liminal spaces: the built materiality and architecture had also experienced radical changes since the move of the capital. The city was still 'under construction,' experiencing a liminal phase full of contrasts. The housing boom and its spectacular collapse represented the phase where things could go wrong. People accepted these events as 'normal' because transitions can be chaotic before stability is achieved. In a similar way, crowded and expensive rental were tolerated as acceptable. Some scholars describe coastal areas as one type of such liminal landscape, while other landscapes entail quests, pilgrimages, and sacred journeys, which are seductive and offer creativity, and in which experiences of reality and fantasy, as well as sanity and madness, are all part of the undertaking (Andrews and Roberts 2012: 6–7). Astana's built environment, with its liminal qualities, made liminal housing acceptable with all its shocking and difficult aspects.

There is a tendency to romanticize and celebrate 'liminal' experiences in post-modern, consumer societies, which are far removed from the original meanings of liminality for individuals, as well as society (Thomassen 2014). Along these line, it is likewise a mistake to romanticize collective renting as a desired end stage, since newcomers desire homeownership and want to live with their families, enjoying stability and not having to move constantly. Similarly, experiences of migrants and refugees have been identified as liminal, in which 'in between-ness' is far from being liberation, but rather a constraint because migrants and refugees are in 'suspension, limbo, transit, non-places, and marginality' (Andrews and Roberts 2012: 4). No newcomer enjoyed paying high rents for a prolonged period of time. Some did give up after several years of staying in Astana and try to establish families somewhere else. Alima too wanted to get out of this transition stage and invest in housing through a home loan, but she had to postpone such plans to an unspecified future. When frustrations occurred, especially with renting, renters remained passive and their difficulties were seen as individual problems, which they had to overcome alone. Here, we can clearly see the dark side of liminality: when newcomers felt stuck in the capital, unable to return home, they kept trying to reach the Astana dream of purchasing a home. Consequently, for some, the liminal waiting period for the Astana utopia turned into a prison of endless waiting, paying and accepting high rents and living in crowded conditions until utopia happens. For my roommates, this meant their transition into adulthood and starting a family was suspended. Some could be stuck in permanent liminality with no prospects of buying an apartment, like Almagul, who felt 'homeless.' For elderly people like her, renting was a sign of failure.

At the time of my research, Kazakhstan still lacked a comprehensive national housing policy and relied too much on market institutions, such as home loans, to encourage homeownership. Kazakhstan followed the trend of other cities across the globe, especially in the Global South, in privileging private homeownership over other forms of property rights, such as state-run rentals. As Hatcher argues, homeownership became globally accepted and

normalized as part of a wider neoliberal agenda (2015). This agenda emerges from eighteenth-century liberal ideas, which linked private property to individual freedom, personal responsibility, and decreased state power. These same ideas stigmatize tenants today as 'incomplete' owners, who are poorer and untrustworthy (Blomley 2004, cited in Hatcher 2015.). Under the conditions of the market economy, the value of homeownership has changed in Kazakhstan too, as Bissenova succinctly puts it. "The ownership of housing has acquired economic (opportunity to capitalize), cultural (as a marker of class), and even political (as a residency status and a sign of "good" citizenship) importance" (2012: 134). The government launched pro-ownership policies by supporting banks and home loans, while ignoring the large number of the urban population that rely on the rental market, which pushes them into crowded apartments. After the failure of the banking sector and the bursting of the housing "bubble," the government fund, Samruk-Kazyna, planned to build rental housing beginning in 2009.[19] This is part of a housing policy intended for long-term tenants who will eventually buy their apartments. However, these efforts were directed towards enabling homeownership for those with stable and medium incomes. The government's housing policy did not address the development of an affordable rental market for low-income groups who cannot pay mortgages. This was the case for many *priezzhie* I met in Astana. The rental market was seen as benefiting private landlords, who were only interested in making a profit while offering as little protection as possible to tenants. Renters in turn felt powerless to influence and change the rental market. Instead of demanding affordable rents with better quality accommodations and written leases, renters just worked harder and hoped to buy their own home in the future, a goal which remains unattainable for many.

[19] Samruk Kazyna www.samruk-kazyna.kz accessed on 20 January 2011.

CHAPTER 4. DATING AND BEING SINGLE IN ASTANA

The day after I moved into my shared apartment, Dilnaz insisted that I join her and her friend at a nearby lake outside Astana. It was a hot Sunday in July and joining them sounded like a good idea. Dilnaz's friend, Sara, came by with her car and picked us up. While we were waiting in the courtyard, a young man approached and offered to sell us his mobile phone. I was suspicious and thought the phone was most probably stolen due its low price. However, Dilnaz was interested and actually bought the mobile phone for 17,000 Tenge ($120) from a total stranger and besides that she gave him her old phone. The exchange took place within five minutes and Dilnaz was happy to own a rather new phone. The man looked to be in his late thirties. He told us that he came from Moldova to work for a construction company in Astana, and then lost all his money in a casino. He needed money to buy a train ticket back to Moldova. That was the reason he sold his phone. There were many foreign men who worked in Astana and Dilnaz was used to meeting them.

Many foreigner men worked on construction sites in Astana, and these men frequented bars and nightclubs. The new capital attracted expats such as architects and engineers, as well as unskilled foreign laborers who were drawn by the capital's construction boom. Astana's urban context and daily life were influenced by a large foreign presence, people mostly working in the construction sector. A dark side of this was that many unskilled labor migrants from neighboring Central Asia countries who came to work in construction were working and sleeping, basically living on the construction sites. With increased mobility in the region and the presence of foreigners, new hierarchies such as the privileged highly specialized migrant workers and 'illegal' unskilled migrants, emerged. Different groups added to the social mix and produced Astana's distinctly Central Asian cosmopolitan character. The new mixture of people made Astana even more attractive for newcomers, who found new economic

opportunities to find work at foreign companies and social opportunities to create new friendships and relationships.

Within this urban context, Astana has developed its own distinct urban residents and lifestyles. Foreigners have also contributed to Astana's specific social milieu, where new sets of social relationships have emerged. These can be defined as promiscuous, liberating, and experimental, as well as risky, dangerous, insecure, submissive, and patriarchal. The new practices in which people are engaging have liminal qualities, and can be associated with "transgressive behaviors and [the] carnivalesque," which may give the impression of 'freedom' (Andrews and Roberts et. al. 2012). Moreover, in contemporary societies, such as Astana's, that are fixated on leisure, pleasure, and consumption, liminality is linked to boundary-breaking activities and experimentation, which in turn lead to temporary suspension of social and moral structures (Thomassen 2014).

Upon moving to Astana, newcomers suddenly had access to a new milieu unavailable in their hometowns. This gave young people the freedom to experiment with and enjoy a period of promiscuity. This chapter is about temporary suspensions of conventional social and moral structures which shape perceptions of the city of Astana as liberating and individualizing. In order to demonstrate that kinds of transgressive, liminal practices that occur, I focus on dating and relationships among young people in Astana. Based on stories and observations of local and newcomer young, single women and foreign men, I explore ideas about dating and personal liberation.

The chapter focuses on the stories of Tahir, a Turkish engineer working for a Turkish construction company in Astana, and Mirlan, who was Tahir's colleague and worked as an assistant to the company's manager. A woman named Mabat was one of Tahir's temporary girlfriends, while Kanysh, Alima and Dilnaz were my roommates. And lastly, Erlan was an undocumented migrant from Kyrgyzstan. All of these people that I interviewed had different social backgrounds and were not only Kazakhstani newcomers, but also foreigners who

pursued various aspirations and goals in Astana. Their living conditions, consumption patterns, and careers contrasted with one another, but also shared some commonalities.

Mabat and Tahir

Contemporary gender roles in Central Asia are shaped by Western-like influences on fashion and sexually explicit lifestyles (Kuehnast 1998). Regarding this, Cynthia Werner, when writing about the post-Soviet changes in gender roles and women in Kazakhstan, states, "Now that the rigid borders separating East and West are gone, Kazakhs are purchasing European fashions, watching Latin American telenovellas, and travelling abroad for trade, adventure and study" (2009: 321). The market reforms and liberalization following the breakup of the Soviet Union forced a large number of Central Asian women to adapt to changing socioeconomic conditions. Many women became active in the trade sector as merchants. They went to Iran, Turkey, or Russia to buy goods in wholesale markets and brought them home via plane or train to sell at local bazaars. In this way, women contributed significantly to household survival at a time of acute economic distress in the 1990s, when salaries were paid months late and massive unemployment followed (Werner 2003). Women became part-time or full-time merchants, while men were reluctant to perform 'female' chores when women were out earning money for the entire household. In this regard, women also escaped patriarchal arrangements at home through migration and becoming breadwinners (Reeves 2012). Meanwhile, men who failed to perform as breadwinners for their families felt emasculated (Verdery 1997). Struggling with unemployment or temporary, low-paying jobs, men were under great stress, which led to feelings of failure, humiliation, and depression (ibid.).

At the same time, newly rich men enjoyed new power and became desirable to women. In this connection, some women searched for alternative means of gaining access to new consumer goods. Joma Nazpary (2002: 17) in his book about post-Soviet 'chaos,' vividly describes how young women in Almaty in the 1990s employed various sexual strategies to

access resources and to obtain better jobs in return for sex with rich and powerful men. Women resorted to these strategies because they were pushed by desire to buy expensive, new, Western goods. These women did not consider such 'sponsorship' prostitution "because of the durability and the interpersonal aspect of the relationship, and the exchange of emotions" (Rigi 2003: 47). New images of femininity were created by modeling, advertisements, and the media, which redefined women as sex symbols first and foremost. The women were selective in choosing partners or sponsors to get access to consumer goods.

One thing that surprised me at the beginning of my fieldwork was how popular learning Turkish was among some of the young women I met. At first, I thought it was because of the many new Turkish series and movies on TV, which had become popular in Kazakhstan. When I went to internet cafés, I would sometimes see young Kazakh women chatting via Skype with their Turkish boyfriends. Soon afterwards, I learned why women were studying Turkish when I met a new informant. Mabat was dating a Turkish man, Tahir, at that time. Mabat had been introduced to Tahir through a friend. Tahir was in his early forties, married, with two children in Turkey. He had a work contract in Astana with one of the large Turkish construction companies. Mabat was twenty-five years old and considered herself to be getting too old to find a husband. She was very outgoing and liked to socialize, which included frequent visits to bars and drinking beer. In Astana, she lived with an aunt, who had no children and lived in a newly built two-room apartment she had purchased with a home loan. She treated Mabat like her own daughter. Mabat's parents lived in the south of Kazakhstan. The apartment was located a residential district. There was a teenage boy living with them, also a relative.

Tahir, on the other hand, had a large, spacious three-room apartment in a very nice area of the old town next to the Ishim riverbank promenade. He shared the apartment with his colleague Mirlan from Kyrgyzstan, who worked as an assistant to the manager at the same Turkish construction company. I will come back to Mirlan later in the chapter. The company

paid around $1000 for their rent. Tahir lived about five minutes away from the riverbank and usually had his dates there. The river promenade was nicely decorated, and newly built houses along the bank hid the old Soviet-era apartments that stood in a row behind them. The place was especially popular among young people and couples who would enjoy a romantic walk with a fresh breeze on hot summer days. Generally, the riverside attracted many people of different ages—locals, as well as tourists and visitors.

In contrast to the disruptive 1990s, during my field research, women in Kazakhstan had more opportunities to earn a living and be independent; however, some young women in Astana had foreign 'sponsors.' These men were usually not Kazakhstanis, but foreign nationals like Tahir. Men like Tahir were mostly married and had children in their home countries and their work contracts in Astana usually lasted for three or four years. The women in Astana were aware that such men were not going to marry them and that the affairs were temporary. Nonetheless, attachments and sentiments complicated such arrangements, as sometimes women gave birth to children and the men left them. Tahir told me that one of his ex-girlfriends had to have an abortion. He had told her she could keep the child, but he would not leave his wife and marry her.

Mabat considered Tahir her 'sponsor' in the sense Rigi describes: A sponsor "supports a woman financially, buys her gifts, invites to restaurants, bars and discos, and may travel with her abroad, in exchange for sex" (Rigi 2003: 47). For instance, winter was approaching and Mabat wanted to buy herself a new fur coat, something women in Astana 'must' have because it serves as a status symbol and protects them from Astana's harsh winters. Mabat wanted to buy a fur coat for $500, but could not afford it since her monthly salary at a notary office was about 50,000 Tenge ($300) which she spent mostly on going out to bars. So she asked her aunt and Tahir to give her some money for the coat. They both gave her money and Mabat could then afford to buy the fur coat. Presenting her fur coat, Mabat was so happy about it that she insisted we go to a nearby bar and celebrate the occasion. Mabat was also

aware of Tahir's marital status but it did not seem to bother her much at least not at the beginning of their relationship. Tahir was, however, becoming more than a sponsor, since Mabat wanted a serious relationship with him, which created problems.

From time to time, I would run into Tahir with other young women on the river promenade. I often went there to take a walk. He would beg me not to tell Mabat that I had seen him. I agreed, although this was a very uncomfortable situation for me since I became friends with both Mabat and Tahir. One day, Mabat herself discovered that Tahir was seeing at least three other women and that one of them was even living with him in his apartment. Mabat was furious because she had believed that Tahir loved her and that she was his only girlfriend. The next day, Mabat went to Tahir's apartment, created a scandal and literally chased the other woman out. Apparently, Tahir and Mabat had a huge fight that evening. Mabat told me the story a few days later. I asked Mabat how the other woman reacted to the whole situation. Mabat stated that she simply left and explained that she did not know that Tahir was dating Mabat, too. This bizarre situation did not surprise Mabat, since she said there were many such young women in Astana, who are ready to do anything for money. She was, by contrast, an exception because she said she loved Tahir. Still, Mabat was surprised at how young the other woman was. "Can you imagine, she was only twenty years old?" she said. Later, I heard from Tahir that this young woman went to live with another Turkish man, an acquaintance of his, as a matter of fact. I found out that the other woman was indeed twenty years old and had come from Almaty a few years previously to Astana to do an internship at a local hospital. She had very little money, since the internship was unpaid. She met Tahir and he apparently suggested that they live together. While telling me this, Tahir seemed a little ashamed but tried to portray himself as a person who just wanted to help the 'poor little girl' with housing. There were many young single women coming from poor families or rural areas who had little money. Many earned some income as waitresses, babysitters, or cleaners. However, the money was not enough to secure financial stability in

expensive Astana. Some foreign men like Tahir exploited this to their advantage by offering young, local women the change to live with them in their apartments for free in exchange for sex.

Thus, next to the privileged Kazakhstani homeowners in the brand-new residential compounds, were groups of expats whose housing costs are covered by their employers. The most visible example was the Turkish construction companies. This situation put such men at a great advantage because they lived in newly built, spacious apartments, like Tahir did, while Kazakh men usually had to rent shared apartments. Foreign men had no problems meeting or dating local women, in contrast to local men with no housing. This created tensions between foreign (mostly Turkish) and Kazakh men in Astana because the latter felt emasculated and threatened by the relative wealth of the former and their ability to attract local women. Some of Tahirs's Turkish friends were apparently harassed by Kazakh men. My roommates told stories about their friends being approached by elderly Turkish men in bars or clubs who invited them to be their 'girlfriends' and live with them. This was a new type of sponsorship in Astana in relation to housing, when young women became temporary girlfriends to these foreign men and lived in their apartments for free. Such practices partly emerged due to high rents and housing shortages. The foreign men offered a solution to women' housing problem sand in return the women agreed to stay with these men as temporary 'girlfriends.' Thus, Astana's social diversity produced new antagonisms. Tahir and his friends avoided certain clubs and bars where Kazakh men tended to spend time in numbers, since going to them could lead to conflicts and even fights. There were also rare cases when Turkish or other foreign men married local women or took them to their home countries when their contracts ended.

I asked my roommates why some local women dated Turkish and other foreign men, even when they knew about their wives and numerous girlfriends. My roommates mentioned that the foreign men drink less and know how to treat women romantically, in addition to earning more money than local men. The Turkish men in particular invited women to their

homes and cooked for them. Afterwards, they cleaned up and washed the dishes, which impressed local women because Kazakh men rarely cooked or cleaned. Indeed, Mabat was surprised when she first met Tahir at how much effort he put into seducing her. Their techniques were all more elaborate than what Kazakh men usually did while dating women. In contrast, local women perceived local men as lazy, spoiled, and not wanting to spend money on them. Not surprisingly then, many women like Mabat would fall in love and try to establish serious relationships with these foreign men. In the meantime, Mabat was trying to learn Turkish to better communicate with Tahir. But he was not interested in a serious relationship with Mabat and frequently changed girlfriends. Mabat and Tahir fought a lot because Mabat was always jealous of the other women Tahir met. Mabat realized that Tahir was going leave Astana at some point and go back to Turkey to his wife and two children.

Unfortunately, such relationships sometimes become abusive. Late one evening, Mabat called me in tears, saying that Tahir had hit her. Apparently, they had had a fight and Tahir 'accidently' hit her in the face; he explained afterwards that he did not mean it, but Mabat was determined to end their relationship. I assumed that was the end of their 'love story.' Nevertheless, I saw the two of them together again two days later, sitting in a café in the neighborhood. Mabat looked cheerful and told me that everything was fine. Men like Tahir knew that there were many single, available women who would keep coming back to them, despite being treated badly. It was only at the beginning of their relationships that these men seemed more romantic and less violent than Kazakh men. In the long run, it was a misconception that they treated women better. Once, when I asked Tahir about Astana he said, "In Astana, there are more single women than men and there is no culture here. It will take thirty more years before this city becomes more interesting. Kazakh people are lazy and they do not work hard. And Kazakh men drink too much vodka and beat their wives." Hearing this, Mabat, who was sitting next to me at Tahir's apartment, was offended and told him to go back to Turkey if he did not like it in Astana. But, as an engineer, Tahir earned a

better salary in Astana than in Turkey. He still complained that, "In comparison to Turkey, there is no social life here. There are no places for people to socialize except for nightclubs where men drink vodka."

In the meantime, Tahir was trying to influence Mabat to become more Muslim. During my research visits to Astana in 2009 and 2010, I witnessed many young people in Astana going to mosques and observing Islamic rituals. Some young women were exposed to religious influence through their foreign boyfriends, like Mabat. For instance, Tahir did not like it that Mabat often socialized with her friends in bars while drinking alcohol; he told her that 'good girls' sit at home and drink tea while waiting for their husbands or boyfriends. Such men like Tahir tried to impose moralizing agendas on their girlfriends to limit their freedoms and to control them. Generally, Tahir accused Kazakh women of being less religious than Turkish women, having loose sexual morals, and not fasting during the holy month of Ramadan. However, this was ironic, since he was not fasting himself, was unfaithful to his wife, and drank alcohol. Still, Tahir allowed himself to moralize and tell Mabat how she should behave. Mabat did not stop drinking alcohol or smoking, but when hearing such comments from Tahir she would become upset. Mabat wanted to be liked by Tahir.

Mabat, in turn, was not a practicing Muslim and drank alcohol during Ramadan, which, for Tahir, was tantamount to committing a great sin. It was during Ramadan that I became acquainted with Mabat and Tahir. One Friday morning during Ramadan, Mabat called me and suggested, to my surprise, that we go to the new Nur Astana Mosque on the Left Bank. I was even more surprised to see that Mabat's friend, who came to pick us in her car, was a Russian woman. She was a tall and attractive blonde in her late twenties, dressed in a business suit with high heels and driving an expensive car. She apparently had a well-paid job. She had converted to Islam recently, the previous year to be exact. From our conversation, I learned that she had dated a few Kazakh men in the past who supposedly did not want to marry her because she was not a Muslim. It was not her ethnic identification but

her religion that was important; at least, this is what the men she dated told her. However, she was still single even after converting to Islam.

We drove to the Left Bank's new mosque in her car and the Russian woman took out a headscarf from her bag and, like the rest of us put it on her head, before we went inside. At the entrance, we took off our shoes and covered ourselves with long overcoats which were available for guests who were not dressed appropriately. This was convenient for women who wore short skirts or pants like Mabat's Russian friend. The mosque was full of people and the mullah was reciting a prayer; women were sitting in the left corner, while men were on the right side. Inside, it was spacious, clean, and very pretty; I felt suddenly like I was somewhere in the Middle East. After being inside for a short prayer, we went back outside; we gave some money to the mosque for charity work, and then we gave some money to the beggars at the entrance as well. And with that, I felt that we had done our share of being pious Muslims during Ramadan. Among us, only the Russian woman was fasting and she was happy that Ramadan would end soon and she would be free to date her boyfriends again. During Ramadan, she abstained from alcohol and men. Yet, her new Muslim identity and her liberal attitude towards casual dating and extramarital sex made for a curious mixture, which she did not experience as contradictory.

Mabat and Tahir seemed to be no longer together and one day Tahir invited me to an Astana nightclub; it turned out to be a striptease club. He said he wanted to meet more women and asked me to introduce him to Russian women, since his Russian language skills were poor. In addition, he said he was afraid to go alone to nightclubs and needed the company of a local. Tahir was worried that Kazakh men, after drinking vodka, might harass him because he was talking to local women. I agreed to accompany him; the place was full of foreign men. It turned out that mostly Russian and foreign men went to this club because local Kazakh men did not visit the place. Tahir danced with Russian women. In the meantime, half-naked Russian and Kazakh women performed very elaborate striptease shows on the stage. One of

them even had a snake wrapped around her waist. Then, the audience was invited to participate. A Russian woman volunteered and performed a striptease to applause from the audience. Tahir had a personal driver to take him to work, but also to nightclubs. His Kazakh driver waited outside until four o'clock in the morning and took Tahir home afterwards with two Russian women he met at the club. Tahir gave me a ride home, first. Tahir's movement in Astana's urban space was limited to 'foreigner-friendly places.' But such places also provided space for young women to casually engage in sexual relations with foreign men without much social stigma.

Women's freedoms were also constrained. My roommates were afraid to date Turkish men since they worried that their potential local boyfriends might find out and no longer see them as 'proper girls.' Kazakh men especially were likely to consider them prostitutes who sleep with foreign men in order to eat in restaurants. Many single women seemed to know that the Turkish men were "womanizers" interested only in short-term adventures, but those like Mabat, at least at the beginning of her affair with Tahir, did not seem to mind this. However, Russian women, who are considered to have liberal attitudes towards sexual conduct, did not bear the stigma of being a prostitute when they dated foreign men. Like Tahir, most Turkish men wanted to date Russians. Alima said, "In the nightclubs in Karaganda, the strippers are all Russian women. And if a Kazakh girl comes up [on stage], the Kazakh men are not pleased." Kazakh men think that it is shameful for Kazakh women to striptease. In Astana, my roommates agreed it was not approved by local men. In this regard, Kazakh men demanded higher moral standards from Kazakh women and placed themselves in a position where they exercised control over Kazakh women's bodies and sexuality, defining proper sexual conduct. The pressure to live up to these images proved not easy for Kazakh women who wanted to exercise more freedom in Astana. Besides conventional norms, growing religiosity put some women under pressure to comply with new expectations, as will be described later in the chapter.

In connection to dating, an increase of the presence of foreigners in Astana was also mirrored in new media. In this regard, one can mention a Kazakh-Turkish jointly produced series called "Astana – My Love," which came out on national television in Kazakhstan in 2010, while I was conducting fieldwork. The main character, Erlan, is a young Kazakh architect, who studied in the U.S. Erlan refuses a lucrative job offer there because he wants to be a patriot and work in Astana. Back in Kazakhstan, he wants to realize some of his new architectural designs and ideas. Erlan is presented as a very bright and ambitious architect who dares to dream big in his ideas about life and Astana's appearance. He imagines a grand future for Astana and even quotes the president. "The look of Astana is the look of the nation." My roommates and I watched the series at home in the evenings; they were happy to see familiar Astana sites, although the movie showed mostly the new, beautiful Left Bank. The scenes from the series featured the Left Bank's Baiterek monument again and again. Other characters in the TV series are also successful and have international experience, like the rich man's daughter, who has just returned from her studies in London. She lives with her family in a villa on the Left Bank.

The main character, Erlan, falls in love with a Turkish woman from an affluent family, who has left Turkey partly to escape her controlling father. She works for a Turkish news channel and was sent to Astana to prepare special coverage about the new capital of Kazakhstan. The woman is fascinated by Astana. She tries to find out the city's history and the reasons it was chosen as the new capital. Not only does the TV series present Astana as the pride of Kazakhstan, it also attempts to present Kazakhstan as having an ancient and rich history and recounts the special meaning of Astana's location. In short, it is a romantic movie, in which Astana is a city where dreams come true, ambitions are realized, if one remains committed, and where people find their 'true love.' More importantly, the series features foreigners, Turkish nationals, who visit or live in Astana. In contrast to reality, where Turkish men were likely to date Kazakh women, it is the Kazakh man, Erlan, who tries to conquer the

heart of the Turkish woman. Hence, Kazakh men symbolically regain their masculinity and pride. The other message of the TV series is that young people who go abroad to study should return to Kazakhstan and be ambitious enough to realize their dreams there. If foreigners come to Astana and admiring it Kazakhstanis should be proud of their new capital too. My roommates liked the TV series a lot, and said, "Wow, they are making a movie about Astana, our capital!" They also learned about Turkish life and culture, of course selected and mediated. Still, many scenes in the TV series were shot in Turkey and portrayed its beautiful nature. Turkey was, nonetheless, becoming very interesting for my roommates as a place with similar cultural and linguistic background.

Astana offered single women like Mabat liminal freedom for deviant experimentation in a fairly anonymous urban space, away from their parents. But this freedom left these women vulnerable to new sexual exploitation by men. The women could also easily be exposed to violence. Mabat did not care much about her reputation and enjoyed having multiple sexual partners, but she was aware of the stigma attached to women dating Turkish men. This could potentially harm her marriage prospects with local men. The next year, when I came back to Astana, I heard that Mabat was dating a Kazakh man. Tahir had a new Russian girlfriend, who was living with him, and said he had no contact with Mabat.

Alima, Dilnaz and Kanysh

Similar to Mabat, Alima, Dilnaz and Kanysh—my roommates—enjoyed the anonymity Astana offered them. These women claimed that Astana was different from other cities in Kazakhstan. They enjoyed the freedom to date various partners and have non-marital sexual relations. Housing practices facilitated the physical mobility of newcomers, while social life was equally flexible, allowing newcomers to enjoy more freedom in private lives. None of my six female roommates was in a stable relationship. They had short-term dates, which could be with foreigners, Turkish or Azeri men, as with the case of Mabat and Tahir. My roommates were rather secretive about whom they were dating or meeting. And no one in

our shared apartment cared or inquired about their private lives. Upon first arriving in Astana, newcomers preferred to share apartments with friends and relatives. In most cases, newcomers could live with their relatives only for a short period of time and usually at the beginning of their stay. Later, they usually became confident enough to move out and live independently with strangers. Living with strangers had the advantage of anonymity, as there was less pressure to conform to certain norms of conduct than when living with relatives or parents. In this regard, my roommates did not seek help from their relatives in Astana, if they had any. Some newcomers did not inform their relatives of their arrivals. For instance, Saiqal from a nearby village moved to Astana with her family. She informed me, "We haven't told relatives that we are here; first, we need to stand on our own feet and then we tell them. But nobody even bothered to ask." In Astana, most newcomers had to rely on themselves. The way of life there was not only characterized by physical mobility, but entailed accepting and justifying new urban sociality. Astana had such a mixture of newcomers that new friendships and alliances formed as quickly as they dissolved. The instability of social relations was not seen as negative, but attributed to Astana's dynamics and renting practices that allowed for this flexibility. Liberation and the relaxation of social relations became possible for many newcomers, who were on their own to 'make it' in Astana.

It was the young and the brave, like Alima, who moved to Astana without much security for their future. Many felt proud of their decisions to have come to Astana and accepted the challenge of creating their future in the capital without much help from anyone. Astana drove many people towards individualization with its promise of independence and freedom from conventional constraints, such as being financially dependent upon one's parents or extended family. It is a modernization of social values which is ultimately embraced by people like Alima:

> I do not regret it at all. On the contrary, I made a good decision and feel very proud. If someone told me then that I would move away from my parents, and start over again

> in a new city renting a shared apartment with total strangers, I would never believe it! My friends also thought that it was only a wishful thinking.

Alima would have been better off if she had returned to her hometown, where she would have found a job with a lower salary, that at the same time would have given her stability. Instead, after a year of unemployment, she accepted a part-time job in Astana as a sales agent in a travel agency. It paid poorly and she was barely surviving. Still, Alima praised Astana as beautiful and modern and wanted to stay. Alima had to scrimp on food and transportation costs and live in crowded, shared rooms, but this, too, was part of Astana's way of life with its liberating, as well as constraining, qualities.

On the positive side, for single people like Alima, the city offered a rich and exciting life. Most young people were looking not only for career opportunities but also for successful marriages, which boosted Astana's entertainment sector. New clubs and VIP lounges, cafes and restaurants were always full of people. My roommates, who were in their early to late twenties, were all single women working hard, but they also wanted to get married in Astana and stay there. Shopping and going out to bars and cafes were their favorite activities. Twenty-six-year-old Ksysha, a Russian newcomer, demonstrates this well. She worked as a cosmetologist when I met her. She enjoyed going out and appreciated the variety of bars and nightclubs in Astana:

> When I first came to Astana, my friends and I were going out all the time. Every evening we spent in clubs and bars. I was lucky to make new friends who are like me. I mean they are fun; you could go out, interact with them and have fun. In this sense I was satisfied. Life was more fun here. [laughs]. It was a carefree life!…You need to earn money here. Not to eat, people eat less nowadays. The main thing is to dress beautifully and be more stylish than others. And to go to some new bar dressed like that. Don't you agree?

Women spent their extra money on beauty items, mostly clothing, and tried to look stylish by buying fashionable clothes. Their looks were important because men paid a lot of attention to women's appearances and how they dressed. My roommates thought it was unacceptable for a woman to neglect the way she looked and dressed. However, women

needed to be not only pretty, but also independent like characters on popular fashion shows on television. My roommates loved watching American and Russian TV shows about models and fashion. They especially liked to watch *American Top Model* in the evenings and lively discussions ensued afterwards. The models featured in the TV show had to be not only beautiful, but also strong and confident to survive in the fashion business. My roommates wanted to be like them, strong but not too independent and pretty and feminine, at the same time. Women in Astana competed for men's attention.

Astana is known as a VIP city due to the visibility of wealth there. The rich like to show off their cars, homes, and clothes and to visit expensive VIP bars and restaurants. The rich thus display their wealth and power through conspicuous consumption. As Ksysha put it, "We have more and more stylish bars, more chic types. It can't get more chic than that! It is the best of the best. Everywhere you go you see the sign 'luxe de la luxe.' Many rich people live here." Astana attracts young women because they can be closer to the latest European fashions than in their hometowns. Astana is the 'right' place for an open manifestation of luxurious lifestyles. The newly built shopping centers and architectural extravaganza invite such displays. Gulmira, one of my roommates, said:

> In other cities, rich people do not show that they are rich, but in Astana they do! They display it through shopping, expensive clothing, and other material wealth. They show it through travelling, where they go on vacation. In short, they want everyone to see how rich they are…Well, the whole world travels on vacation, and people go to exotic places and shop. I also think that we should show what we have and what we can do. I think this is how things should be.

Gulmira says it is 'normal' to display and enjoy material wealth. This taps into the same logic that that purports that Astana's high rent prices are acceptable and similar to other expensive capitals worldwide, as mentioned in the previous chapter. Gulmira, who was unemployed at that time, could hardly afford anything in Astana, but she admired this lifestyle all the same. Willingness to spend money on leisure and entertainment was becoming an important part of urban life, even if one could not actually afford to do so. This consumerist orientation left no

alternatives for imagining different lifestyles. In this way, Astana was not liberating, but rather put pressure on women to live up to new fashion ideas and indulge in conspicuous consumption. This consumption trapped women into trying to keep up with the latest fashions and visit the new clubs and bars. Independence and liberation connected to self-realization were limited to consumption culture.

For many single women and men with limited finances, socializing is expensive in Astana. One Friday evening, Alima and I decided to go out, just the two of us. We decided then to go for a drink on *Respublica* Street, one of the main streets in the center of the old town where numerous bars and cafes were located, making it a vibrant socializing space in the evening. These bars were always full of people, in contrast to somewhat-deserted streets of the Left Bank with its new restaurants. Since we could not get a table in the first bar, we went to the next one over, an average-looking bar with live music. It was already past midnight. Just as we managed to get a table, two more young women, strangers, joined us. We wanted to order drinks, but the waitress told us that we had to order meals as well. Alima wanted to leave because she could not afford to pay for the meal. The two other women at our table were disappointed as well. One of them said, "Nothing is simple [*prosto*] in Astana, why can't we just order something to drink." She meant that, in Astana, even small cafes and bars were expensive and overcharged although they did not offer good quality or service. The two women also decided to leave, since they did not want to order additional meal. So we all left the bar. After wandering the city for about an hour in middle of the night, we could not find a place that was both affordable and satisfied Alima's tastes. On the way back home, Alima said, "Here everything is either too expensive or too cheap. And cheap places are those places one wants to avoid." By 'cheap' places, she meant bars where rural newcomers went to get drunk and would start annoying women and could even get aggressive. Alima concluded, "Astana is a city for the *zolotaya molodezh* [golden youth]. They have money and go to all these chic bars and clubs, while we, ordinary people, cannot even afford to go to decent

places." Indeed, Alima and my other roommates spent most of their free time socializing in our kitchen over food and tea, or watching TV collectively in the living room. After all, it was still a minority of the population who could afford to go to these expensive bars and restaurants on a regular basis.

Alima attended the Constitution Day Parade with her boyfriend and shared her impressions, "There was a magic aura on the Left Bank, everything new and these flowerbeds. You just want to walk with your boyfriend there. We ate at one restaurant there! Wow, I was speechless, very impressive!" For Alima these were moments to be cherished. They reminded her that she lived in the modern capital. These VIP and elite cafes were symbols of globalized, urban lifestyles. Alima concluded, "We are not worse than Europe. We have such a civilization here too." Astana's liberating aspects were tied to consumption paradises. When people could afford to visit expensive restaurants, the satisfaction they experience became very meaningful. They became even more motivated to strive for such a lifestyle. From time to time, women could count on men to invite them for entertainment in the "city of the future."

Moreover, Alima claimed that she could meet more interesting people in Astana then in Karaganda:

> Astana is a big city. It is a new city! Here in Astana, life is more diverse than in stagnant towns. Here there are various styles in how people dress. There are always new people coming in, going back, and it goes on like this, this constant movement. Something changes all the time. New things appear, compared to other cities that are just stagnant. Astana does not stand still.

This resonates with the official rhetoric about fast-developing and changing Astana, the "city of the future," where rushing and catching up with the most developed countries was the ambitious ultimate goal. Against this background, Alima's hometown of Karaganda represented an 'old,' stagnant city, the opposite of what Astana stands for: orientation towards a globalized future. Alima called it Astana's way of life, *obraz zhizni*. One could lead a fairly stable, moderate (read, boring) life somewhere else in Kazakhstan, but only Astana had this

way of life, where people were literally 'holding their fingers on their pulse,' even if that meant being trapped by new consumption desires. Ivan, a young man, was also impressed by the dynamism of Astana. He remarked, "I like this movement here. Because I travel to other cities like Pavlodar and Karaganda, but there is no life there. Everything is slow. And here it is fast, people, cars and everything." This recalls Appadurai's (1996) popular notion of "global flows" meaning that people, money, ideas, and images are in constant movement. These flows contribute to a broad concept of globalization, where speed and circulation automatically become desirable, as opposed to immobility. Along these lines, among newcomers, modes of collective renting and movement of people became something positive that only Astana is considered to offer. The ways in which Astana's spatiality and temporality emerged from my informants' everyday interactions constituted the rhythm of the city, which comprised its unique pace and experience (Highmore 2005: 141).

In view of all this, Almaty, the former capital, with its mild climate was for Alima "beautiful with its old buildings, old alleys, giving a feeling of familiarity and comfort." However, she preferred the new appearance of Astana, even if at times, it was not comfortable and odd-looking. Astana offered new sensations and the experience of the unfamiliarity. The growth and movement of Astana were projected onto the lives of newcomers, who associated changes occurring in Astana with changes happening in their lives. These became even more relevant when in fact no positive changes occurred in their lives, but they could still see changes happening in the city in which they live in and so they felt they were changing too. In this case, they did not feel 'left behind,' since the city's rhythm carried them along. Similarly, Alima identified with the prestige of the modern capital, in which she could take part only superficially and mostly through men who could afford to spend cash on entertaining women.

Dilnaz, my other roommate, had many stories about dating in Astana, including experience dating a foreign man from the neighboring country of Uzbekistan. One evening, Dilnaz told me about her ex-boyfriend, Dilshod, an Uzbek who came to do business in

Astana. He was 'religious,' but with rather liberal views. Dilnaz met Dilshod in 2008 when she was working part time in his bakery business. He offered her a job and helped her out with money. It seemed like Dilnaz was happy with the arrangement. Dilshod was charming and romantic so they started dating and Dilnaz wanted to marry him. Dilshod agreed, but suggested they get married 'the traditional Muslim way,' which meant going to the mosque and getting the blessing and approval of the mullah only. But it would not have been a legally recognized marriage. Dilnaz wanted to have a modern, civic wedding with a white dress and register their marriage legally, as most people do in Kazakhstan. She found it rather suspicious that he did not want to have an official wedding. So one day, Dilnaz asked Dilshod's driver to tell her more about him. The driver apparently felt sorry for Dilnaz and told her that Dilshod was married and had three children back in Tashkent and that, in addition to Dilnaz, he had other girlfriends in other Kazakhstan towns to which he traveled regularly. Dilnaz said it was shocking news. But soon enough, she received a call from a Kazakh woman living in a nearby town, who told her she had gotten married to Dilshod in a mosque and had had his child. Dilshod had wanted the woman to have an abortion, but she disagreed and kept the child. Apparently, Dilshod made the same suggestion to his other girlfriends as he had to Dilnaz: going to a mullah in a mosque to have a Muslim wedding instead of registering at the civil registrar's office. Thus, Dilshod took advantage of women who agreed to bypass official registration. He had no obligations to these women by law and his only official wife was the one in Tashkent. Like Mabat, Dilnaz was free to date a foreign man in Astana, but she too was disappointed at the end. Foreign men came to work from neighbouring countries like Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan or Turkey, leaving their families behind while some created new families in Astana. Men also used 'Islam' to enjoy extramarital relations and trick women into accepting being second or even third wives, without official marriage ceremonies or registration. These women were not protected and

even faced social exclusion, since officially no support or obligations followed from their 'Islamic marriages.'

One day, Dilnaz told me about her Kazakh ex-boyfriend, who had turned violent. He worked for the police. After they separated, he came to her house one evening allegedly to return Dilnaz's pictures and, after she got into his car, he started beating her. This happened in the neighborhood where she lived. He was drunk. Dilnaz screamed for help from the car. The neighbors eventually called the police. But when the police showed up, they saw that the man committing assault was one of their colleagues and did not intervene. They left, letting him continue hitting and kicking Dilnaz in the car. Heavily bruised, Dilnaz received a concussion and had to stay in hospital for a month. She was determined to sue him after this horrible incident, but he told her that she had no chance in court because his parents had important connections to judges. Dilnaz gave up on the idea of suing him and did not pursue the process. Her ex-boyfriend received no punishment and Dilnaz was disappointed and told me how much she hates all policemen now. She learned the sad way that laws do not apply equally in Kazakhstan. Nevertheless, her current friends and acquaintances worked for KNB [Komitet National'noy Bezopasnosti or National Security Committee, the secret police] or the financial police. Although potentially dangerous, they were, at the same time, part of her social network. Dilnaz's position at the court enabled such contacts and she could also use them for favors or to gain prestige. For instance, Dilnaz mentioned that she knew important people in Astana and they all respected her in spite of her relatively young age. She claimed that many men would like to marry her since she worked at the court, but she did not want to date any men connected to the KNB or police because of that bad incident. She had an uneasy and sometimes controversial attitude towards her male colleagues. Despite her connections and despite working at the court, Dilnaz was still vulnerable to violence from such men.

Dilnaz also tried to suit the preferences of more conservative Kazakh men. Such men expected women to behave according to their idea of traditional roles, like being submissive,

pious, and good wives. Once, I accompanied her to a new summer café on the outskirts of Astana, where she was supposed to meet some acquaintances. Alima, my other roommate, joined us. Dilnaz's dressed in a style that was considered 'Central Asian' and reflected the new image of a modest and perhaps somewhat 'religious' Kazakh woman. On this day, Dilnaz wore a long dress that covered her knees and let her long, beautiful, black hair hang loose. The dress resembled what was called the Arab style and she styled herself accordingly. The café we went to resembled a teahouse, decorated in a traditional Central Asian manner with low wooden tables to sit at on a wooden floor just above the ground. Carpets were laid on the floor with comfortable cushions to lean on. The café served Central Asian food as well as alcoholic beverages. It would be uncomfortable to wear a short skirt and sit on the ground and therefore it made sense to wear a long dress to cover one's legs. In addition to 'Western-style' restaurants, there were many such new 'Central Asian' cafes, which were rather popular not only among foreigners, but with locals as well. The name of the café was Otrar, similar to the name of a town in southern Kazakhstan, an ancient city of Turkestan. The place was full and the public mixed. The young, as well as elderly, were dancing on the dance floor to Kazakh, Turkish, and Russian songs. Many people seemed to be having an evening with colleagues, some came with their children.

After we had sat in the ceafe for for half an hour, two male Kazakh friends of Dilnaz joined us. They were visitors to Astana from the neighboring town of Karaganda. One of the men worked for the financial police and bragged that he knew people at the migration office and if we needed help, we could contact him. He claimed that he could arrange a new passport within a week. Alima said that she actually needed to renew her passport, but she was told at the office that the process would take several months and there was a long wait. Dilnaz later told Alima that even if the man bragged about his ability to help arrange for a new passport, he would still take money. Alima did not have the money to pay. Previously, Dilnaz had arranged to buy a plot of land outside of Astana and this same man had helped her register the

documents fast for a fee. Hence, these contacts were still important since in order to 'arrange' such deals, one had to know the 'right' people. When I said that I studied in Germany, one of the men said, "Germans are proud of their beer from Bavaria and other small things." His friend agreed and said, "Kazakhs have low self-esteem because we don't respect our culture, whereas the English are, for example, very traditional and value every detail in their culture and are proud of it. Kazakhs are not like that." These men wanted to demonstrate that they were Kazakhs who valued Kazakh traditions. This also meant that Kazakh women, in turn, should also show more respect for culture and traditions.

Alima had little experience with meeting such men, who acted in a very dominant and arrogant way, whereas Dilnaz felt quite comfortable in their company and knew how to communicate with them. Alima did not like the company of these two men and wanted to go home. After paying for us, the men agreed to give us a ride home, even though both were a bit drunk after having drunk vodka. Dilnaz and Alima did not want to spend money on a taxi and thought it would be rude to leave the men alone in the café. While waiting for them outside, Dilnaz admiring her friend's car, saying, "This guy must know many people and earn good money." On the way home, the driver started speeding, I assumed, because he wanted to impress us, the girls in the back of the car. Since he worked for the financial police, he probably was not afraid of being stopped by traffic police. Men who worked for the security forces felt powerful, had money, and broke rules. This made them attractive to many women. Unfortunately, such men sometimes felt they were immune to punishment, as the sad example of Dilnaz's violent ex-boyfriend shows. When we got home, I asked Dilnaz if she would like to date these men. Dilnaz said that she needed to be careful about her reputation; she would go out, flirt, and spend a nice evening with men who pay for her, but would not have casual sexual relations with them. "You know, here, men know and talk to each other about girls," said Dilnaz. She did not want to be gossiped about as being 'easy to sleep with.' She wanted to keep her reputation as open and social, but still a 'good' Kazakh young woman waiting for

an equally respectable young man to marry. This was perhaps also the reason why Dilnaz preferred to go out with Dilshod from Tashkent, who was an 'outsider' and less likely to spread rumors about her. Dilshod himself was taking advantage of the fact that no one knew about his wife and children in Astana Thus, the liberties women enjoyed in dating men in Astana were reduced to dating foreign men. But, even then, as the case with Turkish men shows, there was the danger of stigma being attached to such women. We never met these friends of Dilnaz again, but they were in the pool of her acquaintances, which made it very likely that she would meet them again. Dilnaz followed conventional gender roles when her male friends invited her out and she acted like a modest Kazakh girl, but also exercised the freedom to choose and date foreign men. Dilnaz had to carefully negotiate her choices and appropriate some options, while rejecting others. Her case illustrates how women had to adjust to the post-Soviet expectations of some men that they would be conservative and follow Kazakh traditions.

Dilnaz had a friend who was a prosecutor. But Dilnaz did not want to date or marry him because she was convinced he would betray her and have many girlfriends. Government workers and especially prosecutors frequented bars and cafes. Although their official salaries were modest, some of them made money from bribes and had mistresses with whom they spent time in bars and clubs. In these bars, just to reserve a table one had to pay about $200-300 per evening. This equaled roughly a monthly salary of a prosecutor, explained Dilnaz. Laszczkowski's (2012: 87) who also did research in Astana mentions that his male informants told him that they enjoyed a period of promiscuity in Astana, freed from their social relations back home. Many felt as if they were single again and the limited choice of bars and clubs initially made socializing easy. These men were 'early birds' transferred to Astana due to the relocation of their government-related positions. Some of the relocated government workers created second families in Astana, usually with younger women, while their first wives remained in Almaty.

In connection to dating, a young Almaty resident, a government worker who was relocated to Astana, wrote about his adventures in his novel, *The City of the Flying Plastic Bags* [Gorod Letayushchikh Paketov] (Adzhidzhirov 2006). The book became popular among some young people, who could relate to his experiences in this cold and windy small town, which they came to slowly appreciate as their new capital. Highly entertaining, the book captures many love stories and dramas which emerged after the relocations and "double" lives of men commuting between the old and the new capitals. The initial adjustments of the government workers, who try to manage their new careers and new mistresses, are highly revealing. The author admitted that the stories are partly based on real events. My roommates all agreed that some members of parliament had several mistresses. This was a favorite topic of the yellow press. There was even a serious discussion when one member of parliament openly proposed legalizing polygamy, actually arguing that all the members of parliament were already living with second or third wives, but just hiding it. The proposal was not supported in parliament though. Still, unofficially, Kazakh women seem to increasingly accept becoming the second or third wives of rich men.

Dilnaz thought 'religious' men are not as abusive as non-religious ones. At that time, one popular way to meet people was to register oneself on online dating sites. Dilnaz signed up on one and found a religious Kazakh man. They arranged to meet and Dilnaz went out to dinner with him. This forty-one-year-old man was twice divorced and a practicing Muslim. His story was sad, as he was arrested by the KNB in 2002, apparently for email exchanges with people in Arab countries, and charged with religious extremism. After serving his prison term, he was released. Unfortunately, his brother was also arrested just because of his affiliation with him. Dilnaz told me after the date that it was not fair that KNB did such things to relatives without any proof that they had engaged in extremist activities. Dilnaz then talked about how the security forces actually work and that they check your emails to see if the word 'Islam' or other religious terms recur often. Officially, Kazakhstand authorities refuse to

admit that there is a growing influence of radical Islam in the country. The terrorist attacks between 2010 and 2012 were carried out by religious extremist groups like Jund al-Khalifa, which emerged in 2011; however, due to secrecy little is known about their ideas and followers (ICG 2013: 18). Court trials involving terrorists were closed to public. The response of the state involved harsh methods such as detention and harassment of individuals who prefer a religious lifestyle (ibid.). Moreover, in October 2013, Kazakhstan approved a State Program to Counter Religious Extremism and Terrorism for the years 2013–2017, which gives the state greater powers to tighten control over religious activities and the teaching of religion in schools (RFE/RL 2013).[20] Traditional Islam is promoted, while other Islamic activities that are defined as 'extremists' are subject to raids, interrogations, threats, and fines that affect religious communities as well as individuals (ibid.). Dilnaz did not see that man again; he was 'too religious' for her, as she put it. She was open to dating religious men as long as they tolerated her not wearing a veil and did not ask her to follow strict religious rituals, like fasting and praying.

Expressions of the new religiosity were not embraced by all. My roommates were distrustful of new pious women. They disapproved of young men and women who now were so-called 'new Muslims': women who covered their heads with veils or wore *hijab*, and men who attended mosques and prayed regularly. Alima said that some men pretended to be good, pious, and 'real' Muslims, while they continued drinking, smoking, and dating many women. She suggested that some young women wore modest dress because they thought they would be more successful in finding a good husband, who would not drink and be faithful because of his religious views. In this regard, Mabat's Russian friend did embrace Islam to become more attractive to men wanting to marry 'pious Muslim girls.' In short, Alima claimed it was becoming a new fashion to be a Muslim; for her, this was not right because Kazakhstan, as

[20] RFE/RL. Retrieved 26 November 2013 from http://www.rferl.org/content/kazakhstan-syria-islam-rights-religion-/25172110.html

she said, was more 'modern' and Western-oriented and there was no need to copy Iran or Middle Eastern countries. Here, we see the parallels to McBrien's findings in her study of the experiences of young women in Kyrgyzstan who choose to wear the veil as a sign of their religiosity, while struggling with the dilemma of seeing themselves as 'modern' (2009). This has to do with the legacy of Soviet modernization efforts and its anti-religious campaigns and the negative discourses about the veil it promoted (ibid.: 28–130). With such modernization efforts, the Soviets claimed that Muslim women had been emancipated from the oppressive patriarchal order. McBrien's newly veiled female informant wants to be seen by her community as modern, while also choosing a new identity as a young Muslim woman. However, women wearing the hijab are seen by less religious family members and friends as copying an 'Arab' form of dress and showing excessive commitment; hijab can even be interpreted as a sign of radicalization, which raises suspicion in their communities (ibid.: 135).

Likewise, Dilnaz and Alima displayed partial attachment to Soviet modernity, judging new religious expressions such as women veiling as 'not fitting' with conventional Central Asian moderate religiosity. Most importantly, they saw Kazakhstan as Western and even globally oriented, meaning that the country is open to difference. Alima did not like this new religious trend because, for her, Astana represented freedom of expression, albeit constrained mostly to consumption and self-styling. She said:

> Yes, there are many creative people here, especially youngsters. They want to stand out from the crowd and therefore choose bright colors, while in other towns everyone is the same, wearing mostly gray and the like…Here in Astana, it is like in Japan or even China, where some young people wear different shoes on each foot. Punks and goths they are called, I guess. So there are different trends here. In Astana, people don't think they are crazy or ridicule them for being different!

This could be a foundation for the emergence of subcultures and alternative urban imaginaries in Astana; however, at the time of my research, the desire to be different seemed to be connected with self-display. The goal was to show that one was familiar with global urban

trends and fashions, which was a sign of being cosmopolitan. Alima claimed that she also tried to wear bright colors and was not afraid to try something new. While I observed that Alima in fact did not really dress provocatively, her statement reflected a desired new self that would fit Astana's image. Alima even mocked some of the Muslim women for being hypocrites. "It's all about making an impression that one is different from the others." These newly religious people seemed for Alima and Dilnaz too pushy and forced their views on others. Dilnaz and Alima accepted more traditional Kazakh ways of practicing Islam, which include fasting during Ramadan and undertaking pilgrimages to sacred sites from time to time. For example, the Mausoleum of Khoja Ahmed Yasawi, located in the city of Turkestan in southern Kazakhstan, was becoming a popular pilgrimage site at the time. Young women went there and prayed, asking for good husbands or to heal their children if they had problems. After their pilgrimages, visitors always had interesting stories to share about what they had witnessed and experienced while in a trance under the influence of 'holy spirits.' Alima and Dilnaz found such stories interesting as spiritual experiences close to traditional Islam in Kazakhstan, mroe than putting on a veil in 'Arabic style' and praying five times a day.

Similarly, the case of Kanysh presents parallels to Alima's and Dilnaz's dating life in Astana. Like Alima, Kanysh was my roommate. For Kanysh, coming to Astana meant that she had 'escaped' from her hometown where she had to follow rules such as respecting traditions and gender roles, and showing the utmost respect to her parents-in-law. Kanysh had gotten divorced after a marriage which lasted nine years. Now at the age of thirty, she had moved to Astana and left her seven-year-old daughter with her parents in her hometown of Atyrau, in western Kazakhstan, where the major world oil companies extract oil. Kanysh finished university and had a degree in law from her hometown. She had also worked for an oil company and earned three times more than her husband, who had been a state attorney at that time. Her husband was very nice to her before the marriage, but afterwards he started

controlling her and became jealous. Kanysh told me that her husband was not happy with the fact that she earned more money than him and felt humiliated when they would meet their friends at social gatherings. According to Kanysh, he started treating her badly and regularly dated other women, which ended their marriage. She thought her husband treated her badly because he was certain that his wife would not leave him because of the stigma attached to divorced women and also because of their child. Not only did Kanysh divorce her husband, she also decided to enjoy freedom as a single woman again. The social space she found appropriate to exercise this freedom was found not in her native town, though, but in Astana.

Kanysh had lived in Astana for two years when she joined our shared apartment in 2010. In Astana, Kanysh worked for a law firm but earned less than she had in Atyrau. However, Kanysh earned more than my other roommates, but paid the same amount in rent, which meant she had extra money to spend. For example, Kanysh ordered a leather coat from Turkey for about $2000. However, she returned the coat because she found it not stylish enough. She preferred to buy clothes at the new shopping malls, in boutiques which none of my roommates could afford. She said, "I feel good in Mega and Saryarka [Western style shopping malls], and I feel bad in the bazaar area." Kanysh commented how a salesperson in one shop was once rude to her and she told her that she would not come back there again. She was satisfied with her life in Astana because she could buy clothes in Mega and occasionally eat sushi in restaurants on the Left Bank. She would tell us she could easily afford a week's trip to Turkey for $700. When Alima, who worked for a travel agency, offered her a trip to Dubai for the same amount, Kanysh did not take it. She did not travel much; she would just mention that she had the money to travel. All in all, Kanysh tried hard to catch up with her 'elite friends' in Astana, as she called them.

In her free time, Kanysh liked to go out to nightclubs and bars. She liked to socialize and constantly told us, her roommates, about the new men she met in those places. Once, she came early in the morning after partying the whole night. She and her friend went out that

night with a Kazakh man who invited them to an expensive restaurant. Afterwards, they went to a nightclub and spent time in the VIP lounge. After partying until five o'clock in the morning, Kanysh left the club, leaving the Kazakh man alone. He had hoped that she would spend the night with him. But Kanysh did not like him because "he was fat and wore a fur coat and a golden ring. He was acting like a Kazakh khan [king]." But he spent about $200 for the restaurant and clubbing and Kanysh was proud that a rich guy like him had paid her way. Kanysh knew that Astana offered more interesting men than that one and was enjoying her freedom to flirt and explore what the city had to offer. She claimed that she was often approached by men in their early twenties. Kanysh had some affairs with Turkish men, who were usually younger than her. This differed from Mabat's environment, where Turkish men were usually much older than the women they dated. Kanysh would mention that these foreign men were romantic; buying her flowers and wanting to marry her despite the fact she was divorced and had a seven year-old-daughter. Kanysh liked their attention and claimed she married too young at the age of twenty-one and did not get to enjoy her single life back then. However, she seemed to be aware that the Turkish men were usually not serious enough to marry her. Kanysh started going to expensive bars, where she would meet other foreigners, from the West.

While Kanysh disliked Kazakh men because they acted like 'khans,' she still followed traditional gender roles, as the foreign men she searched had to be 'masculine' and financially well off. Disappointed with Kazakh men, she wished for a foreigner who still fit traditional gender roles, but who would be perhaps nicer and less violent than the Kazakh men she knew. She mentioned that the reason she came to Astana was to enjoy her freedom as an independent woman. But instead of challenging male dominance, Kanysh reinforced her subordinate position to men in her encounters with foreign, as well as local, men. In order to be liked by these men, Kanysh intentionally behaved like a naïve teenager who wanted to be entertained and financially supported by men, despite the fact that she had a relatively well-

paid job. She dressed to look younger than her age, which usually meant wearing very short skirts and tight clothes. She did not want to appear too independent or threatening to her potential suitors and would lie about her age. Kanysh had some friends who were also financially independent Kazakh single women, but preferred to date foreign men. The foreign men, however, were not in a hurry to marry them. Still, these encounters opened up new opportunities for Kanysh to imagine her future with a foreigner. She said, "After having dated foreigners, Kazakh men appear so silly." Kanysh spent money on tickets to parties organized for foreigners by foreigners in Astana. These social gatherings could take place in hotels like the Radisson, where charity events were sometimes organized. Kanysh enjoyed being single again, but was trapped by conventional dating rules.

In our shared apartment, Kanysh did not even have a proper bed. She had to sleep on a mattress on the floor in a room shared with two people and she was away from her daughter. Although she was cheerful most of the time, sometimes she would get upset and complain, saying, "It is not fair that men can do whatever they want, while women cannot." The freedom to date she enjoyed in Astana was temporary, since she wanted to remarry, perhaps a foreign man this time. In our apartment, she had no private space to bring her boyfriends home. Some of her acquaintances had also divorced their husbands because the men had slept with other women and were often violent to their wives. Their ex-husbands easily remarried younger women. Kanysh said that in cases of divorce, the parents of the husband always supported the decisions of their sons and never defended their daughters-in-law. On the contrary, they blamed the women for being bad wives who did not live up to their expectations and usually blamed them for the marriage problems. In this sense, Kazakh gender norms remain patriarchal, such that women, despite achieving financial independence, remained subordinate to men.

A new sociality associated with liberal Western and global urban lifestyles was part of the diversity and richness of social life that many appreciated in Astana. Kanysh was divorced

but Astana gave her the chance to start a new life, where she felt less socially stigmatized because of her divorcee status. Women like her were more or less financially independent and claimed that they had left their hometowns to escape their parents and parents-in-laws, who were conservative and restricted their freedom. In addition, their hometowns were too small: everyone knew everyone, and gossip spread like a whirlwind. In comparison, in Astana, we never even met our neighbors and they did not know anything about us. In light of this, living with strangers in shared apartments was even preferred as a way to enjoy greater anonymity. At the same time, these newly gained liberties were risky; women could be labeled as 'prostitutes' by Kazakh men if seen with foreigners. Kazahstani men judged women and shared information about the women they knew, like Dilnaz's friends from the financial police. Moreover, some women were in abusive relationships with foreign men. Women still expect to be provided for and have their ways paid by men, even when they were financially independent, like Kanysh and Dilnaz. Both women had relatively well-paid jobs by Kazakhstani standards, but they bragged about how men would spend money on them. A man's value was measured by his ability to provide consumer items for his girlfriend. Women had to meet the expectations of these men, which included being pretty, submissive, andultimately, following conventional gender norms or even becoming more religious. Astana offered only a temporary phase of promiscuity, which was tolerated to a certain degree, without challenging the institution of marriage as such, or the role of women in general.

Mirlan

Young men also experimented with and discovered new lifestyles in Astana. Men had more control over their lives than women; however, they still had to fulfill filial duties and live up to new social ideals connected to being independent and internationally successful specialists or migrant workers. Mirlan was in his late twenties and had lived in Astana since 2005. He was a roommate of Tahir. Mirlan was a 'new Muslim,' meaning he consciously turned to pious, non-political Islam. Mirlan regularly went to a mosque, abstained from

alcohol, attended Friday prayers, and fasted during Ramadan. There are recent studies on growing influence of Islamic movements in Kyrgyzstan from Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Pakistan, India, and Iran (Ismailbekova and Nasridinnov 2012; Balci 2012). But as early as the 1990s, Central Asian states experienced the Fethullah Gülen and Tablighi Jamaat movements, which developed transnational networks in the region through schools, media, and economic life (Balci 2012, cited in Croix and Ismailbekova 2014: 4). Mirlan's interest in Islam started when he attended one such Fethullhah Gülen Turkish lycée in Bishkek.

Growing up in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, Mirlan internalized the Russian language and adopted an urban mode similar to long-term Kazakh city dwellers, described in Chapter 2. After middle school, his parents decided to transfer him to a Turkish lycée. He graduated from the Kyrgyz National University with excellent grades in early 2000 and wanted to study abroad in Turkey or the U.S. As a graduate of the Turkish lycée, he had mastered Turkish and English. He applied to a leading Turkish university and was accepted, but was unable to secure a scholarship for the tuition. He then traveled to the UK to attend English-language courses in London; while there, he worked at various student jobs. After Mirlan came back to Kyrgyzstan, he went to Russia to the city of Yekaterinburg with a Turkish friend to start a bakery business. After half a year of unsuccessful attempts, their business went bankrupt and Mirlan was in debt. Mirlan came back to Kyrgyzstan again and then went to Almaty to look for employment. Through his Turkish contacts, Mirlan was invited to work to Astana for a big Turkish construction company. They promised him an attractive salary and he was to help to open the company's branch in Astana. Thus, in 2005, he came to Astana and started his career in the third largest Turkish construction company there and shared an apartment with Tahir, who worked as an engineer at the same company. Most of the private developers in Astana were Turkish construction companies. Turkish construction companies have established themselves in Central Asia and carried out different projects, including the reconstruction of the highway from Almaty to Bishkek overseen by the Asian Development Bank. Mirlan's

journey to Astana was thus made possible through the Turkish network he had established in Russia, Kazakhstan, and Turkey.

The company where Mirlan worked subsequently built shopping malls and business centers in Astana. One of their projects was the Bolashaq Business Center of 40,000 m^2 on the Left Bank. Mirlan's first impression of Astana was, "Construction was non-stop here. I had the feeling this was the biggest construction site in the world at that time." Since 2005, Mirlan directly witnessed many improvements in Astana: people dressed better and bought expensive clothing and cars, he summarized. The service in shops and restaurants had improved. I asked him whether ordinary people can afford to shop at these new shopping malls. He said that he goes to shop in these shopping malls. Mirlan admitted that most ordinary people went to the cheaper bazaar shopping areas, which had replaced the old bazaars and acquired a new, modernized look since they had roofs. These were bazaars like Evrasia, Artem, and Shapagat. Masha who appears in Chapter 2 worked at Artem. The Western-type shopping malls with cinemas and entertainment for children, such as Keryen, Sary-Arka, and Mega, were affordable only to a minority. Still, Mirlan said, "Astana is developing fast; it will grow in the future. I see people who have money. Because if you go to cafes and bars, even during the weekdays they are always full. People have money to spend." Other Turkish companies built five-star hotels. Then, the world financial crisis ended the construction boom in 2007. Mirlan's company had stopped building a new shopping and entertainment mall, which was only one third complete. It was 'frozen.'

Mirlan mentioned that Kazakhstan protects its labor market from foreigners and that it was complicated to invite foreign specialists from Turkey, but that they still managed to bring them to Astana under the quota system. There were different quotas for various categories of foreign workers: Mirlan included himself and Tahir, who was an engineer, in the first category: the highly specialized labor force. Less qualified specialists from Turkey were invited and housed in mobile homes, which fit about sixty to ninety people. The company

provided accommodation for free and the Turkish specialist workers earned substantially more than the locals. The local Kazakhstani, unskilled construction workers earned about120–150 Tenge (1$) per hour, which totals about 36,000 Tenge ($260) monthly for a sixty-hour work week. Mirlan said that their Kazakhstani workers could earn up to 60,000 Tenge ($500) per month with overtime, which was a good salary for Kazakhstan in 2009, he added. Several of my other respondents told me about the working environments in such Turkish companies and mentioned that Turkish companies provided free lunch for them and generally provided better working conditions than Kazakhstani construction firms. Thus learning the Turkish language was becoming a pragmatic decision for those who wanted to develop their careers in such companies. At the same time, skilled Kazakh workers complained that the Turkish supervisors earned twice as much as the locals, despite having the same qualifications, and were provided with free housing and all kinds of bonus payments the locals were denied. The Turkish nationals enjoyed special privileges in their companies. Relations with foreign nationals were not always harmonious; many local workers felt that the foreign companies provided employment but were also cheating them, for example, by not paying them benefits.

Yessenova (2007) describes a conflict between domestic workers and foreign nationals working for the Senimdi Qürylys (SK) subcontractor for TengizChevroil company, where the former engaged in physical fights with Turkish nationals (2007). The conflict turned into a mass riot due to the socioeconomic disparities and labor discrimination in the Tengiz Rotation Village, an industrial base that hosts subcontractors and their workers. The domestic workers protested the removal of compensation money for housing and accident insurance (ibid.). As mentioned in the first chapter, housing was very expensive in Astana and many local construction workers repaired old houses outside the city and made them into temporary dwellings or rented rooms in shared apartments. Thus, many workers were upset when the construction company refused to give them compensation for housing. However, often the locals lacked the required skills to do more qualified work, which was seen in other sectors as

well. For instance, the newly built hospitals were equipped with the state-of-the-art technology, but lacked specialists who could operate it. Sassen (1991) claims that the new global hierarchies of cities creates great wealth for transnational elites, while increasing the ranks of local workers, who work for low wages to serve the needs of transnational corporations and their elites. In Astana, too, the masses of *priezzhie* worked for low wages to serve the needs of national and transnational elites, whose lifestyle and aspirations are similar to each other.

Mirlan was not considered, nor would he call himself, a 'migrant' due to his status and position. He said he was a 'highly skilled specialist.' Working for a prestigious Turkish company, he advanced from administrator to head of external relations and finally to assistant to the general director of the company. He was happy with his status and salary in Astana. His company provided him with free housing and took care of his work permit and *propiska*. The company also paid for Kazakh lessons, since business negotiations and paperwork were scheduled to change entirely to the official language. At work, Mirlan dealt with documents in Turkish, Russian, and Kazakh. In addition, after work, he brushed up his business English at an expensive language school. He consciously distanced himself from Kyrgyz migrants who were involved in manual labor. He said, "I know that there are many Kyrgyz here in Astana, but I don't meet them. They are usually unskilled workers or they are traders, who come from the south of Kyrgyzstan." In addition, he claimed there were many Kazakhs from the southern part of Kazakhstan. For him these were all one social group, that is, poor rural unskilled workers.

Indeed, Mirlan's lifestyle did not resemble that of an unskilled or undocumented labor migrant. For instance, he said he never went to the bazaar to shop. His clothes were bought in Turkey or from the boutiques in the new shopping malls of Astana. He said it was better to buy them in Europe or at dutyfree shops in airports. In his free time, Mirlan played football with his colleagues in Astana and went to a nice, new swimming pool in the new Triumph of

Astana iconic housing compound. This swimming pool was rather expensive and exclusive. Likewise, riding public transporation was almost degrading for Mirlan. Like Tahir, he had a personal driver employed by the company. He could not remember when he rode a bus the last time in Astana. Finally, Mirlan had a cleaner, a young Kazakh girl, a *priezzhiy*, who would come once a week to clean his apartment. Thus, in Astana, Mirlan cultivated his status as an upper middle-class man, with little in common with his counterparts from Kyrgyzstan, who were mostly undocumented labor migrants, as will be discussed later. Beyond this, he made a conscious and careful effort to be part of the mobile global business class and follow their lifestyle.

Despite distancing himself from other Kyrgyz migrants, Mirlan declared himself a Kyrgyz patriot and was an active member of a Kyrgyz-Kazakh internet platform, through which Kyrgyz workers in Kazakhstan stayed connected with each other. This internet platform was an online group whose members shared their experiences in Kazakhstan. They offered help or provided information on jobs, housing, and other practical matters, like getting a *propiska* or a work permit. Experienced members, like Mirlan, offered advice and help to newcomers. On this website, there were blogs with active discussions about political and cultural processes taking place in Kyrgyzstan. It was a way for many Kyrgyz to be active and feel connected to Kyrgyzstan, their home country. Most importantly, the members of this group significantly differed from the struggling, undocumented labor migrants who were performing unskilled jobs. Most had a university degree obtained in Central Asia or even abroad and spoke several languages, with Russian still being the dominant one. Some posts were in English.

The members of the Kyrgyz-Kazakh internet group wrote about the companies they worked for and how they came to work in Kazakhstan. Most lived in Almaty or Astana. Useful contacts were made through that platform. Many of them seemed to have access to the internet through work. There were social gatherings of Kyrgyz compatriots in Almaty, where

they met in restaurants and socialized. From the photos they posted, one could see that they were well dressed, and were dancing and having a good time. The Kyrgyz attending such parties seemed to create a feeling of home, even if they were away from home. In this sense, many of them were transnational migrants, since they maintained close contact to Kyrgyzstan, their homeland, and sustained cross-border relationships and affiliations (Vertovec 2009). Most of the Kyrgyz used the internet to communicate with their friends and families in their hometowns, and crossing the Kazakh-Kyrgyz border was a regular routine. At the same time, Mirlan expressed his anger and frustration with the ongoing protests and corruption in Kyrgyzstan. The inability of the Kyrgyzstan government to secure even the basic protection of its citizens became evident when ethnic clashes occurred between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in 2010. In contrast, Kazakhstan's stability and its functioning state structures seemed to many people a much better option. Importantly, despite his education and skills, Mirlan was not able to find a promising job in Kyrgyzstan.

Mirlan's parents wanted to visit him in Astana, but he kept postponing the date because the winters were cold, and in summer, he had a lot of work, he explained. He had recently taken his parents to a holiday resort in Turkey, paying for all their expenses in a five-star hotel. Showing me pictures from the beach in Antalya, he was very proud and it seemed as if he were fulfilling his duty to take care of his parents even from afar. His parents were not religious like him, but they supported his choice to lead a religious life. They were retired, but belonged to the urban intelligentsia of Bishkek; in the past, his father had worked for the police and his mother had been an accountant in Soviet times. Mirlan mentioned that, when he was young, his parents would fly for a weekend to Moscow to attend a ballet or opera.

However, Mirlan was not entirely happy about working in Astana and leaving his parents alone in Bishkek. He wanted to be next to his parents. I asked him if he liked Astana, "Well, I don't mind living in Astana. I don't complain. Still I would like to live close to my parents. I have a job here and earn my bread, but I know that this is temporary. I can't tell you

when exactly I will leave Astana, but it could be in one, two or even three years." Mirlan did not wish to stay in Astana, "I need to be close to my parents and relatives as well as friends. I should live where I grew up." As the youngest son, he intended to go back to Kyrgyzstan and live with his parents. According to Kyrgyz tradition, the youngest son is supposed to take care of the parents when they get old. Mirlan was feeling pressured to meet the expectations of his parents. His elder brother lived and worked in Almaty. Thus, both sons of the family were abroad and the parents lived alone. Mirlan also had a sister, but she was married.

Mirlan's friends in Bishkek were important to him; he kept in touch with them and tried to visit them when he was in Bishkek. In relation to this, Mirlan mentioned more than once that Western youth leave their parents in nursing homes when they get old and how selfish he thought this was. It would be unthinkable for him to leave his parents in such a home for elderly. As Kirmse claims, young people in Central Asia, even while exploring globalization, are still embedded in their social environments and constrained by family obligations, ethnic affiliation, urban and rural backgrounds, and gender (2010: 385). Still there is space for them to exercise limited freedoms and negotiate their options and choices; migration with prospects of financial independence was one of these (ibid.). This was very obvious in Mirlan's case. He was mobile, educated, and felt the need to fulfill his filial duties as a good son, even from afar. At the end of the day, he was not as free as he seemed at first and he felt very much attached to his parents, relatives, and friends back home in Kyrgyzstan. In Astana, he was just a temporary 'guest' without any meaningful relationships. His roommate Tahir, with his promiscuous sexual behavior represented deviant norms to him and was destroying morality. Mirlan was not happy with Tahir's behavior and wanted to move out and live alone; at the same time, Tahir became his best friend in Astana. He said Tahir was like a brother to him. In addition, if Mirlan moved out, he would have to pay his own rent. His attitude towards Tahir was mixed. Mirlan felt in-between, leading an independent life and not fully meeting the expectations of his parents, and he felt guilty that he was not there for them.

In the meantime, Mirlan found inner peace in his Muslim identity. He wanted to be identified not only as a Kyrgyz, but also part of the global community of Muslims. He had not always been a practicing Muslim. Only in the previous couple of years had he become pious. He had found his place in Astana through religion and identified himself with the transnational Muslim community. His friends were his colleagues from work, i.e., mostly Turkish nationals and Kazakhs who were also practicing Muslims. Traveling between Turkey and Astana, Mirlan was often on the move. He was a committed fan of the Turkish football team Galatasaray. On his business trips, he met other Muslims, who were educated and successful and had international careers. Mirlan wanted to become like them. His favorite places to travel were Dubai and Turkey, where he was impressed by how both countries combined Western modernity and Islamic lifestyles. He regularly attended the newly built mosque, Nur Astana, on the Left Bank. Every Friday, he went there for weekly prayers and he fasted during Ramadan. Beyond this, abstaining from alcohol, he harshly criticized those who drank and sometimes even refused to be friends with them. He expressed admiration for his Turkish colleagues' work ethic and their responsibility to their families and, importantly, their identification as Muslims. This is similar to what has been written about Tajik Muslims living abroad in Moscow, who integrated into urban Moscow's Muslim community and "experience[d] new forms of global belonging beyond the narrow regional and ethnic boundaries" (Schröder and Stephan-Emmrich 2014: 9). These Tajik Muslims wanted to be connected to the wider Islamic world. Such cross-border exchange of religious ideas was taking place not only in Moscow, but also in Astana. New Islamic ideas came from scholarly exchange and study, labor migration, the media, pilgrimages, and new Islamic schools and universities with books translated from Arabic, Turkish and Persian (Ismailbekova and Nasridinnov 2012: 9). This was also evident in Astana. Moreover, transnational Islam was becoming an urban phenomenon and a status symbol that integrated Astana's ethnically and socially diverse population, as the case with Mirlan shows.

Mirlan was clear that his future wife should be a practicing Muslim like himself. He criticized young Kyrgyz women for being 'not religious' and behaving inappropriately. Mirlan said that some young women are now too 'Westernized and spoiled,' meaning they were forgetting 'Kyrgyz traditions.' Although he did not say it directly, it was clear that he was referring to women like me, who are well-educated and financially independent and refuse to accept conventional gender roles. At the same time, he admired such women for pursuing their goals in life and becoming independent. Mirlan was, however, not ready to give up his dominant position. He said that, as part of 'Kyrgyz traditions' and according to Islam, men were allowed to marry four women and provide for them. While he was searching for the ideal Muslim woman, he had short-term girlfriends in Astana. As my roommates Dilnaz and Alima mentioned, some young women strategically chose to be more pious to be desirable on the marriage market. Schröder and Stephan-Emmrich (2014) found that young Tajik women gained symbolic capital through religious education and became marketable on Dushanbe's marriage market as promising Muslim brides. Because of this, some Tajik parents who were worried about the influence of 'Western or European lifestyle' on their daughters were ready to send them to 'pure' Islamic countries such as Egypt for religious education (ibid.; 9–10). In Astana, too, women who openly displayed new religiosity through observing Islamic dress code, regularly attending mosque, and fasting during Ramadan were becoming very desirable to a certain group of 'new Muslims' like Mirlan. There were also special internet dating sites, where people signed up to find pious spouses. Mirlan mentioned that his future wife must, first and foremost, respect, love, and serve his parents thus follow 'Kyrgyz traditions.' Still, he also wanted her to be educated and modern while being a pious Muslim. Thus, he defended 'Kyrgyz' and 'masculine' identities that celebrated masculinity. Furthermore, Mirlan was sarcastic about the mission of Western development organizations like the Soros Foundation, which promoted democratic reforms and a human rights agenda in Central Asia. He regarded Western influences as 'brainwashing' and believed in some of the conspiracy theories about

Jews and Americans controlling the world. It is worth mentioning that some of my other informants also seemed to believe in these conspiracy theories. For example, Mirlan was well informed about the latest news regarding the Israeli/Palestinian conflict and harshly criticized Western support for Israel and called the West hypocritical. Thus, Mirlan accepted Western standards of living, while rejecting Western standards of "being," as Blum puts it (2007, in Kirmse 2010). For "being" Mirlan accepted the Islamic way. Mirlan's religious identity and the lifestyle he cultivated were very selective and influenced by Gülen's ideas about a transnational unified Muslim identity.

Mirlan was a privileged transnational migrant. His Muslim identity and lifestyle traversed political and cultural borders, while he remained rooted in Kyrgyzstan; at the same time, he found a new belonging in transnational Islam (Vertovec 2009). He was mobile and could easily pick and choose religious ideas from the various places where he travelled: the UK, Russia, Turkey, Dubai, and Kazakhstan. In Astana, Islam helped him to feel included as part of a global Islamic community. For Mirlan, it was a conscious decision to adopt a new religious life influenced mostly by the Gülen movement, as well as transnational Islam. Mirlan's experience in Astana revealed the growing influence of Islam in the region, especially in urban areas, where religion brings people of different ethnic, national and social backgrounds together. At times, Mirlan was an uncompromising Kyrgyz patriot and a Muslim, but he also distanced himself from unskilled Kyrgyz migrants. This was a status and a class difference. He was well educated and highly mobile within international networks; he valued individualism, self-realization and Western education. But this did not mean he accepted gender equality; on the contrary, he supported women being in a subordinate position and justified this as part of Kyrgyz culture and an Islamic way of life. As other scholars note regarding the competing global and local discourses in Central Asia and elsewhere, young people move between plural worlds without necessarily experiencing them as contradictory (Kirmse 2010). In this light, Mirlan's engagement with Islam and his

exploration of Western individualism and consumerism coexisted without being contradictory. On the contrary, they sharpened his commitment to his 'Kyrgyz roots' and masculinity, while widening his options to exercise agency and autonomy. He still felt a strong sense of obligation to his parents. In Astana, he found an appropriate urban space for his career, as well as a new religious identity. At the end, he was uneasily situated in-between, experiencing the tension between his independence and his filial duties. He knew that eventually he would return to Kyrgyzstan and take care of his parents, living with them together with his pious wife. In the meantime, it seemed, he enjoyed his life in Astana. He was proud of this job, had a personal driver; his housing was paid for and he had multiple short-term girlfriends. Mirlan cultivated a type of masculinity which gained additional support from his religious identity and transnational experience. Migration and this Turkish network made this kind of life possible for him, one he was unable to realize in Kyrgyzstan.

Erlan

In this section, I discuss an undocumented *migrant* named Erlan and compare his life in Astana to Mirlan's. Erlan is also caught up in achieving his goals of financial independence and official status as a registered migrant with a permission to work in Kazakhstan while not being able to attain either one of them. As discussed in Chapter 2, the term *priezzhie* is mostly used to define Kazakhstani newcomers to Astana, while the term *migrant* is used for unskilled labor migrants, mostly from Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. This is why Mirlan preferred to call himself a specialist and not a *migrant.* In addition to the term *migrant,* the term *gastarbeitery* is also used, like in Russia, where the 'guests' do all the hard work the locals do not wish to do and most of the time have no work permits and no rights. The presence of many Uzbek and Kyrgyz unregistered construction workers in Astana during the construction boom only reinforced this image and the labels of *migrant* and *gastarbaitery*, too.

Among other things, globalization also means there is a higher demand worldwide for high-skilled technical and managerial elite migrants, as well as for low-skilled or unskilled migrants (Jordan and Duvell 2003; Castles and Miller 2009, cited in Dave 2014: 352). The Gulf region is an extreme example of this, as most professional, as well as manual workers there are foreign migrants who come from all over the world. As is well documented, the majority of the low skilled workers comes from Southeast Asian countries, such as Bangladesh and India and sends remittances back home. Dubai claims the highest percentage of migrants in the world (Wippel et al. 2014). This was also partly relevant for Kazakhstan during the period of my field research. The country needed both highly specialized experts, as well as low-skilled workers. However, only for managers, professionals and skilled workers were there legal provisions existing under a quota system for hiring foreign workers in Kazakhstan. For unskilled workers, who actually make up the overwhelming majority of the foreign workforce, there was neither legal framework nor a quota system for hiring them legally (Dave 2014). This created a paradoxical situation such that Kazakhstan needed and indeed used the cheap labor of migrants, while refusing to acknowledge their existence, is a case of strategic neglect by the state, argues Dave (ibid.) The situation allows for various officials, businesses, subcontractors, and private persons to pursue rent-seeking activities connected to labor migration.

Tahir and Mirlan discussed above are examples of highly skilled workers invited to Astana under the foreign workforce quota system. But, in Kazakhstan, special quotas exist only for a small number of highly skilled migrants. Less than 10% of foreigners worked legally, while the rest, more than 80%, worked informally in construction, agriculture, the service industry, and household sectors (Dave 2014: 346). For this latter group made up of Central Asian low-skilled, temporary labor migrants, there was no legal regulatory framework. Since Kazakhstan had visa-free regimes with neighboring Central Asian states, migrants entered Kazakhstan as tourists or visitors legally and declared ‘personal’ as the

purpose of their visits when crossing the border. However, most of them then took jobs without work permits and violated laws on labor and migration, thus becoming 'illegal' to the state; it is estimated that about 1.2 million labor migrants worked informally as shuttle or circular migrants in 2013 (ibid.). When migrants failed to register within the given period or overstayed their visas, they also become 'illegal' and were subject to fines and deportation. Although both Mirlan and Erlan were transnational migrants coming from the same country, their lives in the host country were very different. They both were temporarily in Kazakhstan; both wanted to leave Kazakhstan and kept postponing their return into an unspecified future.

Despite promoting reforms to modernize the practices of the government administration when it came to adopting a legal framework to regulate migration, Kazakhstan had at the time done little in terms of changing anything. Tellingly, at the onset of taking over the OSCE chairmanship in 2010, Kazakhstan delayed signing the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families (Marat 2010: 25). Officials refused to acknowledge the scale of informal labor migration within the country, and focused on illegal transit, trafficking, and terrorism threats instead (Dave 2014: 347). As previously mentioned, this was a case of strategic neglect on the part of the Kazakhstani state, which was not interested in legalizing labor migration. Migration officials and police forces tacitly supported and provided protection for migrants in return for bribes, but at the same time fought 'illegal' migration through deportation (ibid.: 357). These measures tended to be demonstrative and took the form of raids and random checks to fulfill the orders of high officials, usually at the onset of some event or after an announced campaign by the government. Scholars agree that it was beneficial for both the Russian and the Kazakhstan governments to keep labor migrants semi-legal since their economy, corrupt officials, and employers made profits from cheap labor (Dave 2012; Reeves 2013). Authorities seemed to fight illegal migration while turning a blind eye to the fact that many companies hired undocumented migrants and imposed no punishment for doing so.

This was also the case with Erlan, undocumented and working informally in Astana without a way out to legalize his stay there. Erlan was a Kyrgyz man in his late twenties. He was a distant relative of a university friend of mine from Kyrgyzstan, who gave me Erlan's phone number so I could meet him when I was conducting research in Astana. Erlan came from a village in eastern Kyrgyzstan, from the Issyk Kol Region. He had already been living and working for eight years in Astana without registration, always afraid of being deported at any time by the police. Working at different, low-skilled, menial jobs when he first came, he saw no prospects for career growth or legalizing his status in Kazakhstan. At the time of our encounter in 2009, Erlan did not have an official work permit, but he worked at a fancy fitness center on the riverside promenade, where he prepared cocktails. Every day, he saw mostly affluent Kazakhstani men come in their expensive cars to the fitness center to enjoy their free time, doing sports and telling each other about their latest visits to Europe or their vacations. In the meantime, Erlan saw his Kazakhstani colleagues advance in their careers and rise from simple administrators or assistants to managers and supervisors. They bought new cars on credit since their salaries were stable and credit was easy to obtain. Others invested in plots of land on which to build their houses so they could settle in Astana. Many found girlfriends or even got married. For Erlan, no such advancement was possible, due to his undocumented status. He wished to buy a car on credit, at least, but could not because of his status. Over the eight years he had been in Astana, not much had changed in Erlan's status or the type of job at which he worked.

Erlan admitted he was ignorant regarding Kazakhstan's migration laws and said that it was hard for him to legalize his stay in Astana. He looked for other ways to gain Kazakh citizenship, but the bribe which was required was too high for him; he needed several thousand dollars to pay intermediaries, and still there was no guarantee it would work. Some Kyrgyz men married Kazakh women in order to obtain documents and thus gained Kazakhstan citizenship. These men could work legally. Erlan said that fake marriages take

place for a fee, which was up to $2000, but he did not want to do this. Yet another option was to get registered as a Kazakh returnee, *oralman*; however, it was a long and complicated procedure and also required bribes. From the options he listed that other people like him used to obtain work permits, it was clear that there were no formal legal provisions Erlan could use to legalize his status. Many migrants have no choices other than these options, which try to subvert or circumvent the official channels through bribery and corruption. But, Erlan was undecided if he actually wanted to stay in Kazakhstan and so he remained undocumented.

Every time Erlan crossed the Kazakhstan border, he had to bribe the immigration officers in order to receive the required migration card, since he would have overstayed the time he was allowed to be in Kazakhstan. This migration card is filled out and stamped when one enters Kazakhstan and has to be shown at the immigration control upon leaving Kazakhstan. If a person overstays the allowed period, then he or she is detained for twenty-four hours and then deported to Kyrgyzstan. In 2009, migrants could stay for up to ninety days. However, after the April 2010 violent revolution in Kyrgyzstan the allowed period was reduced to thirty days, due to a fear of the influx of refugees. In 2013, the law changed again and Kyrgyzstan citizens could enter Kazakhstan by crossing the border with a new migration card and stay 'up to one year' (Dave 2014: 353). At the Kordai transit post on the Kazakhstan-Kyrgyzstan border, an undocumented Kyrgyz migrant could pay a bribe and get a new migration card for $50 (Marat 2010: 38). There is a thriving informal industry to assist migrants in obtaining migration cards. This involves bus and taxi drivers, heads of construction brigades, and numerous other intermediaries, who take migrants' passports across the border to obtain new stamps (Dave 2014: 353). In particular, bus and taxi drivers carry documents back and forth. In connection to this, the new, post-Soviet borders have created new inequalities, as evident in asymmetrical power relations generated through cross-border migration in Central Asia. This is boldly manifested at the Kazakhstan/Uzbekistan or Kazakhstan/Kyrgyzstan borders, where a large number of Uzbekistani and Kyrgyzstani

migrants cross Kazakhstan's border and face long and complicated inspection procedures and mistreatment from customs officers. Online newsletters have report money extortion, bribery, beatings, and humiliation of migrants, which occur on a regular basis.[21] Beyond this, there were cases when Uzbek and Kyrgyz migrants returning home from Russia were robbed when entering Kazakhstan's territory on the train. Finally, migrants have to register within five days of arrival. Similar to *priezzhie*, migrants avoid registering with the Migration Police and buy their registrations from intermediaries for a bribe.

Erlan's living situation was similar to many *priezzhie* living in shared apartments, as described in the housing chapter. Erlan shared a three-room old *Khrushchevka* apartment next to the old bazaar with seven other people. There was a married Kyrgyz couple with their two-year old daughter living in one room; another Kazakh couple lived in the second room; and three singles shared the third room. The Kyrgyz roommates were Erlan's friends so they lived like a big family. The Kazakhs were *priezzhie* from a nearby town. Erlan told me that he would come home late in the evening and leave very early in the morning for work. As we spoke, he started recalling funny stories about his initial years in Astana. He said he once shared a one-room apartment with seven or eight other young men, who all lived together in one room. Once he got up early in the morning to go to the bathroom and, when he came back, there was no space for him to sleep. Someone else had taken his place. These men were sleeping on mattresses on the floor very close to each other. Erlan laughed while telling me the story, but still his present situation was not much better. There was no private space for him. He could not bring any friends or girlfriends to his place. In fact, it seemed he had no girlfriend at that time.

Meanwhile, he led a very modest life in Astana. He rarely went out to bars and clubs and did not drink alcohol in order to 'stay healthy' and not because of Islam, as he put it. Working at the fitness center made him aware of staying fit and he could regularly train there

[21] See more articles on Fergana.ru available at: http://www.fergananews.com/articles/7835

for free. Erlan had not been inside many of the newly finished buildings in Astana, such as the Pyramid or the Triumph of Astana. He mentioned that he heard about the new construction projects on the news and on TV. To my surprise, he did not know the city well, even after eight years of living there. Erlan limited his explorations of the city for the sake of his own safety. Nightlife in Astana with its multi-ethnic social make-up could easily lead to all kinds of conflict, as mentioned with regards to Tahir. When Kazakhs and Kyrgyz traded nationalist jokes in bars and cafes, mutual insults could easily escalate into fights, especially when alcohol was involved. But Erlan avoided such situations since he knew that when the police became involved, it meant more trouble for him due to his undocumented status. Thus, Erlan avoided such places altogether. He only went out with friends from Kyrgyzstan. Erlan also said that some Kazakh men had also developed strong nationalist sentiments and hostility towards foreigners. Moreover, Kazakhs had a patronizing attitude towards Kyrgyz and Uzbeks, seeing them as poor neighbors who come to work for the 'rich' Kazakhs and to build their homes and summer *dachas* (cottages). Cheap and dispensable migrant labor allowed many Kazakhs to build and renovate their houses and apartments and subcontractors and private employers to hire undocumented migrants (Dave 2014: 352).

The Kyrgyz I met during my fieldwork were not proud of their home country, claiming that nothing had changed for the better in Kyrgyzstan. In comparison, Astana was vibrant and a symbol of change, but such changes made the Kyrgyz feel bad and unequal to Kazakhs. A Kyrgyz friend said, "Look at Astana! See what the Kazakhs have achieved!" Forced to leave their homeland in order to find jobs in Kazakhstan, many Kyrgyz felt there was little to be proud of with respect their country. In the 1990s, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan suffered the consequences of the transition from socialism equally; however, rich in mineral resources, Kazakhstan achieved a sense of stability and economic growth and faith in the future. For many migrants, the quality of life was much higher in Kazakhstan. Many Kyrgyz citizens saw migration as the only possible means to improve their material situation.

Moreover, for young Tajik and Kyrgyz men, migration, Roche argues, has become a 'shortcut' to maturity and respect (2010). Despite all the hardships, migration allowed for remittances to be sent home by Central Asian labor migrants, which contributed to sustaining the livelihoods of their families back home. Most of them intended to return home after they had earned enough for planned lifecycle events or to cover other needs (Schmidt and Sagynbekova 2008; Reeves 2012). Migration came to be perceived "as a normal way of life and even a positive experience" (Laurelle 2013: 20). The national governments and the politicians of the sending countries tend to see migration as a solution to widespread unemployment and are afraid that if they return, migrants might destabilize the political situation (Marat 2010: 14). As described, Kazakhstan was only interested in welcoming highly skilled specialists and ignored the exploitation of the masses of unskilled laborers. Accordingly, neither the sending nor the hosting country feels responsible for the wellbeing of migrant laborers. In addition, undocumented migrants are unable to lobby for better working conditions and social protection in receiving countries (Marat 2010). Erlan's case confirms this. To the authorities Erlan remained invisible. Because the period of saving money for lifecycle rituals becomes expanded, keeping labor migrants away from home for long periods of time, young men like Erlan postpone marriage and family life for an unspecified amount of time.

Working without proper documents has many unpleasant consequences. Kyrgyz migrants told me stories of being cheated by their employers in Astana; some of them were not paid at all, after working on construction sites for several months. They felt humiliated and cheated by their Kazakhstani supervisors. They did not seek help from the law, however, because of their distrust of them and because of their undocumented status. Labor migrants faced harassment from the police and were thus vulnerable to exploitation in Astana. A Kazakh informant in Astana who worked on a construction site with Uzbek migrants commented, "These Uzbek migrants work hard. They do all the heavy work and get paid half

as much as we do. They do not complain." Indeed, reports likewise confirm that an undocumented migrant earned only half a local's salary and his or her employer did not pay social or pension taxes (International Crisis Group January 2010). Public officials had little interest in protecting the rights of migrants, so exploitation remains unpunished (Marat 2010: 38). Public discourse in Kazakhstan was indifferent and sometimes even hostile to labor migrants. Despite complaining about bad treatment, most migrants preferred to remain invisible. They negotiated their wages with potential employers and settled for verbal agreements. By avoiding and mistrusting official channels, migrants were semi-compliant in their undocumented status, as they see the law as such not on their side but as potentially harmful (Dave 2014: 354).

On a brighter note, most migrants like Erlan found ways to find employment and receive regular wages, even if they earned less than Kazakhs. Erlan could afford occasional trips to Kyrgyzstan during the summers. Since Kazakh and Kyrgyz languages are similar learning Kazakh was not a problem for many Kyrgyz migrants like Erlan. In the meantime, he improved his Kazakh and gained the trust of his employer by being competent and hard-working. In general, my data supports Dave's findings that labor migrants are active agents, entrepreneurial, willing to take risks, acquiring cultural and social capital, and despite the absence of legal provisions, prove able to use opportunities in the labor market (2014: 349). With time, many migrants became savvy and learned ways to avoid the police and deportation, better protect their earnings and documents, and find support in their social networks (ibid.).

Like Russia, Kazakhstan needs a foreign work force to supply its growing economy with labor and fill the niche of low-paid jobs in the service, construction, and similar sectors, which locals avoid. So a paradoxical situation remained: while migrants were highly visible in urban spaces, sweeping the streets in Astana, cleaning public buildings, waiting on tables in cafes and restaurants – they remained invisible to the state, due to the absence of work permits

and undocumented status. The state allowed labor migrants to stay invisible, while it profited from their cheap labor. Only recently has the Kazakhstan's government started to address the issue of internal, circular labor migration and temporary migration from visa-free neighboring countries, but the adopted measures, such as issuing a labor patent (work permit) for domestic workers, were not adequate and did not solve the problem of widespread, informal employment of labor migrants (Dave 2014: 350).

It was unclear how long Erlan would stay in Astana. As the youngest son, like Mirlan, his parents expected him to get married soon and bring the bride [*kelin*] into their home. Fulfilling his filial duties was important to him. But, each time Erlan was at home he felt he wanted more from life, and in his village, nothing had changed in all these years. He said, 'The same unfinished road is there, or the rock which no one removes from the street.' The rock was a metaphor for the lack of progress and so he kept delaying his marriage to come back to Astana and work another year in order to save money. He seemed to be torn between his responsibilities to his parents to be a good son and his own aspirations to become a bit similar to his clients in Astana, perhaps, and somehow legalize his status.

Erlan's future plans remained uncertain. Everything was temporary; he could leave Astana at any time. He was undocumented and always trying to escape being caught by the authorities. Astana, and Kazakhstan on the whole, were more financially promising than Kyrgyzstan. As long as there were few prospects for economic development in their home countries, the future hopes of many migrants were tied with the receiving countries. Thus, thousands of Central Asian migrants remain in Kazakhstan for unspecified periods of time, leaving their families behind; sometimes they start second families or register fake marriages to legalize their status. Others, like Erlan, were saving up for a wedding in Kyrgyzstan to return with dignity as mature, independent man. Erlan said that his parents had already found him a suitable woman from his village to marry, but he had to postpone marriage. Erlan wanted to be seen a successful migrant in the eyes of this parents and community back in

Kyrgyzstan, although in Astana, all he possessed was a bed and a sleeping corner in a crowded apartment. He was waiting for his 'real' life to start in Kyrgyzstan, while in Astana he merely earned money, for eight years already.

Analysis: Delayed Marriage

With Astana's increasing physical mobility and social mixture, young men and women from different parts of Kazakhstan were socializing not only with each other but also with nationals from countries like Turkey, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan. Kazakhstan thus became a regional hub appealing to qualified as well as unskilled labor from far and near abroad. However, this 'new' urban diversity proved to be a challenge, as well as an opportunity, since, as new ethnic groups came to interact with each other on a regular basis, new tensions and inequalities appeared.

Astana allowed young *priezzhie* to be financially more independent, to earn better salaries than in their native villages and towns. But living expenses such as rents and basic goods were also much more expensive. In addition to higher salaries, many young people sought entertainment in Astana. Astana's socially and ethnically diverse urban space offered room for experimentation and freedom to exercise autonomy, which were not available in their hometowns and villages. In addition, Astana's consumer-oriented lifestyle tempted people to engage with extravagant leisure activities. In this, Astana's way of life was quite distinct from that of other towns, where there was less 'flow' and urban dynamism. The imagined lifestyle promised by Astana's utopian vision was not only a background, but also a point of meaningful reference, where mundane practices were constantly reshaped, influencing behavior and urban practices. Astana's urban space offered people certain flexibility and agency to direct and shape their lives since there was a relaxation of social expectations and pressure from extended kin. The 'adventures' of young single women in Astana with married foreign men were one example of such promiscuous and deviant behavior. However, these new liberties were only temporary and did not challenge the

institution of marriage or traditional women's roles. Examining the encounters of single Kazakhstani women with expats, as well as with local Kazakhstani men, I looked at how women used Astana's urban space and how, in this process, gender norms and new freedoms found expression. Partly accepting and clinging to traditional gender roles, young men and women strove to find a balance between meeting parental and societal expectations, while trying to achieve their goal of independence and finding a suitable partner. Women were constantly navigating between compliance, risk management, and fulfilling their dreams of self-realization, and finding the 'right' boyfriend or husband.

It is known that, in general cities, offer potential for personal change and growth, described as fluidity of urban life; cities also allow for experimentation and role innovation in urban encounters (Hannerz 1980: 269). As Thomassen states, the boundary-breaking aspects of liminality typical of contemporary societies are to be found in cities. "Entertainment industries thriving on sex, comedy, and violence now operate from the very spatial centres of cities." (2014: 12) As mentioned previously, in a liminal stage, everything is possible and contradictions are part of mediation; but this period is also about breaking normative boundaries and the suspension of social and moral structures (Thomassen 2014; Andrews and Roberts et al. 2012). In this regard, in anthropology, the liminal has been recently connected to notions of fluid or hybrid culture, such that a person feels as if he or she is "in another place" attached to physical space, but disconnected from the social reality (Thomassen 2012: 26). Thomassen links this to the liminal condition of consumerist societies looking for fun. "In a world where an increasing number of people are in constant search for excitement and stimulation of senses, boredom is always lurking around the corner." (2012: 31) Moreover, the postmodern turn sees liminality as celebratory and part of emerging global cosmopolitanism (ibid.). This liminal period can be compared to beach culture and tourism, where individuals seek fun and are open to out-of-the-ordinary experiences. The dating experiences I observed in Astana were connected to the excitement and fun life that single

women searched for in the new city. Seduced by Astana's promise of consumption paradise, many single women were attracted to foreign men, who had more cash to spend on them and housing to provide them with the privacy they lacked in shared apartments.

Mabat, by dating Tahir, was engaging in deviant behavior as she was dating a married, foreign man. Unlike, local men, Tahir was perceived by Mabat as more romantic, and also caring about the needs of women in bed. In addition to sex, she enjoyed financial support from Tahir. Mabat engaged in a promiscuous relationship with him because she was free to do so without any control from her parents. But Tahir was abusive and took advantage of his housing and financial situation to seduce and use single women.

Alima was proud of her independence from her parents. In her hometown, she lived with her parents, but in Astana she became financially independent for the first time. Alima, who wanted to find her love in Astana, was unable to do so, partly because she could not afford to go out and meet men. Her work at the travel agency was poorly paid and she complained about Astana being only affordable for the children of the rich. Nonetheless, from time to time, she would get invited out by her male friends, which meant that men still retained their dominant role as financial providers. In addition, Alima liked the dynamism of Astana, which meant that she thought there are more chances of meet interesting and perhaps better men in Astana than at home. However, without any private space available to them in shared apartments, women like Alima were prevented from having private lives. Thus, my roommates were free to date whomever they wished, but in fact they had no private space to do so. It was up to men to provide private spaces.

The case of Dilnaz shows very well how limited the dating freedom of local women in Astana was. Dilnaz cared a great deal about keeping her reputation as a 'good girl' and thus about being suitable for marriage, in the eyes of local men. She too, however, had a dating experience with a foreigner. After her Kazakh ex-boyfriend turned violent, she was surprised by how generous and tender her Uzbek boyfriend was. However, he turned out to be already

married, to her disappointment. Dilnaz made attempts to date a religious man, and met with a man much older than her, who was also divorced. Although this particular man was 'too religious' for her, she was ready to date such men who would likely demand strict obedience from women and try to control them. Dilnaz, at the age of twenty-seven, had a hard time finding a suitable partner to marry. But she allowed herself to have foreign sexual partners for the time being, who did not seem to threaten her reputation.

To Kanysh, who was disappointed by her husband and other Kazakh men in general, Astana seemed to give a chance at a new start. Divorced women like her have expectations about men which make it difficult for them to find a suitable partner among the locals. In Astana, she wanted to decide who she dated, without feeling pressured by her parents and partly escape the stigma of a divorcee. She thought Astana would allow her to date and find foreign men who were better than her Kazakh ex-husband. In Astana, Kanysh had to sacrifice personal comfort, having no private space in shared apartments and being away from her daughter, whom she left with her parents. She found life in the city with foreign men somewhat exciting; however, these men offered her only short-term affairs and Kanysh struggled to find a stable relationship. She wanted to find a masculine man who would be ready to provide for her and offer her a fanciful life in the new city. Her case illustrates that women's financial independence did not liberate them from being subordinate to men.

Gender roles in Kazakhstan are partly shaped by the Soviet legacy in that the Soviet emancipation of women left gender roles at home untouched and therefore created a "double burden" for Soviet women (Buckley 1997). Katherine Verdery writes about the contradictory roles promoted for women under socialism such that women were 'heroines of socialist labor' but also had to carry the mission of raising children (1996: 67). Post-socialist states focused on "restoring to men their 'natural' family authority" (ibid: 80). Beyond this, Werner rightly observes that the discourse of shame and tradition connected with practices of bride abduction in post-Soviet Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan marks a shift towards patriarchy, in which men

assert control over female sexuality and mobility (2009). Gender relations are additionally being redefined in Central Asia through the revival of 'Islamic values,' national traditions, and a patriarchal shift (Kandiyoti 2007). The lives of my female informants confirm these observations. With increased nationalist sentiments in Astana, Kazakh men were 'protective' of Kazakh women when it came to dating foreign men. It became a status symbol for influential and affluent men to have a mistress or unofficial second wife in Astana. Only wealthy men and nationals from foreign Muslim countries took advantage of the revival of 'Islamic values' to assert their power over women. The 'new Muslims' and Kazakh patriots condemned women for being 'too Western,' and having liberal sexual attitudes while ignoring the traditional gender roles. Men asserted power to control women's sexuality, mobility and religiosity. The phase of promiscuous sexual behavior and casual dating with foreign men was overshadowed by exposure to mistreatment and abuse.

In contrast to rich men, foreign or local, most *priezzhie* men had no money to entertain women, so some took second jobs to earn extra cash. Many did not even have girlfriends; they needed all their money to cover their own living expenses in expensive Astana. Men, rich or poor, were still held to ideas about masculinity that meant they were under pressure to meet the expectations of their parents and future wives to provide housing and become the main breadwinners. Since local men in Astana with no housing could not get married, they had to postpone such plans for later. Women had to wait until their potential partners could find housing and provide for the family. This meant that young men and women involuntarily delayed marriage and family plans. The single lives of my roommates were thus effectively extended. In the case of Mirlan and Erlan, this was even more evident, as migration meant they temporarily postponed marriage and their filial duties.

In *Regimes of Mobility* (2013), Schiller and Salazar are critical of the discourse of various 'flows' and 'transnational connections' popularized by Appadurai (1996), Glick Schiller and Fouron (1999), among others, which contributed to the celebration of the

narrative of mobility for the last two decades. Diversity, mobility, and the ability to travel were positively linked with each other and valued as such (Schiller and Salazar 2013:186). Mobility was then critically reexamined, when the global economic crisis made national borders and ethnic barriers more relevant than previously. And yet the language of 'flows' was seen as novel, 'disrupting the previous fixed relationships between culture, territory, and identity' and thus making the condition of 'status' on the other end normal (ibid.). Schiller and Salazar suggest using the term 'regimes of mobility,' instead of mobility, in order to raise the awareness of the relationship between privileged movement and the forbidden movement of the poor, powerless, and exploited (ibid.: 188). Indeed, the multinational construction companies where Mirlan worked relied on cheap, domestic workers and Central Asian informal migrants. Despite an increase in mobility in the region, the experiences of undocumented migrants significantly differed from that of the privileged, as demonstrated by Erlan's story. "It is the labor of those whose movements are declared illicit and subversive that makes possible the easy mobility of those who seem to live in a borderless world of wealth and power" conclude Schiller and Salazar (2013: 188). The contracts offered by transnational companies were desirable for mobile and skilled workers, while for the unskilled, they entailed precarious working conditions with few benefits and little security, as could be partly also seen in the case of Kazakhstani workers in Astana. Informal migration in Kazakhstan is part of a regional and global trend that makes migrants illegal, deportable, and exploitable (Dave 2014: 349). The lives of unskilled Central Asian semi-legal labor migrants can be defined as floating, precarious, and without any rights. Likewise, Reeves reminds that scholars should be careful when embracing 'flows' and unmediated movement, since there are also border controls, military barracks, and prohibitions that restrict the everyday mobility of many Central Asians (Reeves 2007, 2011). After 1991, Central Asia's internal borders transformed into international borders, effectively restricting the spatial mobility of people living on the borders. These spaces became 'state spaces,' where bureaucratic obstacles

reinforce ethnic diversity as a threat (Reeves 2011). The state's power to monitor and regulate movement across borders effectively restricts movement in the face of globalization, as demonstrated in the case of Erlan, who needs to give bribes each time he crosses the Kazakhstan/Kyrgyzstan border.

CHAPTER 5. DESIRE FOR SUCCESS: CAREER ASPIRATIONS

In this chapter, I discuss how Ivan, Asyl, Raima and Dilnaz, who come from different social backgrounds, experiences, skills and abilities, work towards achieving and realizing their professional goals in Astana. Their stories were just snapshots in a specific timeframe from a very complex social reality, but what united them was a strong belief that their personal dreams and aspirations could become true in Astana. A better-paying job was the number one reason given by the majority of my sixty informants who wanted to improve their employment situation or to find promising careers in the state bureaucracy. Many newcomers indeed found employment opportunities in Astana that were better paid than in their hometowns and villages. There was also an oversupply of labor in Astana, which led many to accept jobs below their qualification levels, while many of the unemployed were not officially registered as jobless. Although many newcomers stayed in Astana, others had to leave due to lack of housing or jobs. Many of these returned periodically to Astana in search of work.

Following Massey's (1984) insights regarding how the social is spatially constructed, I focus here on how the discourse on Astana as a city of opportunities, represented in its built environment, was actualized by newcomers. The built environment symbolically conveyed the message that dreams can materialize here. This message was internalized by newcomers and they believed that anyone could become successful in Astana through mobilizing his/her agency in particular directions. Regardless of one's initial circumstances, one could pursue a career which promised success. In this light, conventional social or structural barriers became irrelevant, which also recalls the attributes of liminal periods of time, where everything is possible, and rules do not apply (Turner 1967). Thomassen goes even further, claiming that, "For a while, anything goes: taboos are lifted, fantasies are enacted, indicative mood behavior is reversed, the low are exalted and the mighty abased" (2014: 206). Thus, radically new ways of imagining one's abilities became a real possibility in Astana. This found expression in the

activities of *setevoi marketing* (pyramid scheme), becoming a member of the Toastmasters Club, and striving to attain a career in the government administration.

I argue that Astana's urban space was especially conducive to speculative practices as evidenced by the spread of pyramid schemes, *setevoi marketing*, and Ivan's example. The success of *setevoi marketing* was based on its equalizing force. Such activities became even a preferred choice for some people who were convinced that Astana needed 'new' types of people, businesses, and even everyday performance. I examine such new residents, who were active and creative agents, and who also contributed to shaping neoliberal subjectivities. As an example of how this played out, Raima's initial difficulty finding employment was interpreted afterwards by her as a challenge which she needed to overcome.

The presence of ministries raised the status and prestige of civil servants in Astana. The new capital is a city of government workers. When it became the new administrative center of Kazakhstan, the demographic profile of Astana changed, since it now included *chinovniki,* i.e., bureaucrats (*chinovnik* in singular). When used by ordinary people, the term *chinovniki* held negative connotations that separated them from 'decent' citizens. Not surprisingly, *chinovniki* preferred to call themselves *gossluzhashie* (*gossluzhashiy* in singular), like Dilnaz did. For instance, my informants used the term *chinovniki* when they said something negative about the performance of state bureaucrats. But the term *gossluzhashiy* was increasingly used with a respectful tone in casual conversations, as I came to observe during my fieldwork.

Astana became a new home for 'new' civil servants. The success of the state discourse of Astana as the "city of the future" also entailed cultivating a distinctive identity for civil servants by raising their prestige, allocating them bonuses, and giving them special housing privileges so that even low-ranking officials, like Dilnaz, felt included. Filled with pride, government workers made up a special category of people who created their own small,

exclusive universe. The stories of Dilnaz and Asyl about their relations, challenges, roles, and institutions were intrinsically related to their self-positioning as government workers of Kazakhstan. Dilnaz identified herself as a *gossluzhashiy* and strategically invested in her skills and consciously cultivated this privileged position by using various new opportunities, which were not available to others. Then, there were the Bolashaq graduates, who could be regarded as the fruit of a successful government project. They were the 'new' elite given the task of modernizing the state apparatus without changing or challenging the regime. Asyl socialized with other Bolashaq graduates at the Toastmasters Club which was a debate club in English. She cultivated an identity of an achievement oriented successful young person. Asyl and Dilnaz found themselves in a unique position: they could selectively accept and reject state reforms and changes. In short, both Dilnaz and Asyl appropriated an 'elite' status to gain symbolic and material benefits. I demonstrate how this process of acquiring privileges and resources took place.

Finally, the development discourse promised by the Astana project rested on the belief that eventually all kinds of shortcomings would be eradicated. This had real consequences in the present. When the image of Astana broke down, factionalism in society became visible and vivid, and criticism emerged from the cracks of the disconnection between the practical reality and the promise. This was the 'other' side of Astana, where heavy shadows hung over the city, which co-existed with the representation of success with which people over-identified. Waiting for future utopia and success rendered opposition powerless and legitimized Nazarbayev's regime. For ordinary residents and newcomers, I argue that the disconnections between hyper-Astana and everyday practices experienced during the realization of concrete, materialist goals were transformed into temporary and personal challenges rather than being perceived as a social issue. Just like the housing situation, which was unstable, the economic opportunities that many tried to capture were fleeting and

differentially distributed, as seen in this chapter. When dreams failed to materialize and expectations were not met, many people refused to give up and leave Astana, which had failed to uphold its promise of success. Instead, they trapped themselves in self-initiated attempts to adapt to new circumstances and to cultivate a self-reliant subjectivity.

How to Get Rich Quickly in Astana: *Setevoi Marketing*

In Astana, where native locals lived side by side with ever increasing numbers of newcomers from all over the country, difference played out in a competitive climate of economic rush. I heard on several occasions that Astana was equally harsh to everyone, but also that everyone had the chance to 'make it' here. For many newcomers, Astana's image as the "city of opportunities" meant personal success was possible. First and foremost, this success entailed material well-being and was connected to consumption fantasies, like buying an apartment or a car, as shown in Chapter 3. This quest for success is quite remarkably illustrated by the popularity of *setevoi marketing* (hereafter, SM), which in the West is known as a product-based, multilevel marketing or pyramid scheme. *Setevoi marketing* was a mysterious business for many. But it was very attractive for newcomers, for fortune seekers in Astana who wanted to get rich quickly. During my fieldwork, I decided to find out more about *setevoi marketing*. Local newspapers were full of job advertisements connected to it, offering jobs with such fancy names as distributors, promoters, franchisers, or managers. In fact, many of these terms were adopted by firms doing pyramid scheme, in order to differentiate themselves from other similar schemes and their competitors. One thing was clear: these borrowed American and Western professions sounded very promising and fancy, fitting Astana's image of "city of opportunities." SM flourished in hyper Astana, where images created a reality more believable than reality on the ground (Nas and Samuels 2006). One of my informants commented, "*Setevoi marketing* is now thriving like crazy! Every other person is doing it. People come and offer you something; everyday, someone approaches me

with that here. Well, but this is also a kind of business, I think. A different kind of business though."

I called a phone number from one of the newspapers and made an appointment for an interview at a firm looking for distributors and independent agents, as they described them. The company's office was located in the center of the old town, on one of the main streets next to the post office, a lively street with a lot of traffic and many cafes nearby. The second and third floors of the mid-size, refurbished, modern-looking building were the main offices of a firm called Tiens Group, I later found out. The office looked impressive and the lobby was full of people waiting their turn to be interviewed. After waiting for half an hour, I was interviewed by a Kazakh man in his fifties, who said the position as an independent agent was the right job for me because their businesspeople travel to foreign countries and use high-quality products that they try to distribute. I learned that Tiens Group Corporation was a Chinese multinational conglomerate founded by a Chinese businessman named Li Jinyuan in 1995.[22] At a seminar I attended with other recruits, company staff told us that it was a Korean company. I assumed that saying it was a Korean company was a marketing strategy. Korean products had a better reputation than Chinese ones. Based on its website, the company sold a huge selection of consumer products; it operated in biotechnology, cosmetics, logistics, real estate, and other markets. It sold products through direct marketing to consumers using a multilevel marketing approach. This approach made the company a pyramid scheme. The products which were eventually offered to me at Tiens Group were overpriced items for everyday use, such as shampoo and toothpaste. Their quality was advertised as 'very good' and 'not to be found elsewhere.' Over the next two days, I attended training seminars, which explained how the Tiens Group business works: new recruits like me first had to invest $200 and purchase products from the company; then they find more recruiters who would buy the same products. According to the pyramid scheme, recruits would receive a commission from

[22]For more information look up http://www.tiens.com/.

every additional member who joined. In this way, those on top of the pyramid would receive their share, too.

On the first day of the training, we registered in the hallway and then were led to a big seminar room where forty to fifty new potential recruits took their seats. The audience was mostly young people between twenty and thirty years of age, but middle-aged people and a few pensioners were present as well. The seminar began with a confident and professional-looking Russian woman in her early forties giving an inspiring speech about the opportunities their business model offered. She first recounted some realities of life saying that unemployment was a real issue in Astana, as well as in Kazakhstan, more generally, and how it was hard to find a job without the necessary connections (svyazi). Everyone listened very attentively and seemed to agree with her. Using herself as an example, this woman promised that her company offered a real chance to become financially independent, regardless of age, education, ethnicity, or social networks. All that was required was personal ambition and confidence. Then, interactive games followed in which audience was invited to participate. The audience was fully engaged and, as I observed, most people seriously considered joining. After this introduction, the recruits found out that the company was a pyramid scheme and, among more than forty people in the room, only one young woman stood up and left. Afterwards, I had the impression that, especially for rural newcomers, the seminar was convincing. They were disadvantaged in terms of language skills,[23] education, and networks, compared to newcomers from urban areas. Thus, it was appealing to them when the trainers at SM emphasized that no formal education or professional experience was needed. Their initial circumstances did affect their ability to succeed. Such jobs promised a fortune in a relatively short time, with opportunities to do business oversees and to travel as bonuses. Our trainer was a good speaker, who with his interactive methods, convinced recruits that this model of

[23] Newcomers from villages were discriminated against by urbanites for 'village manners' and poor Russian skills.

selling products was the most efficient in the twenty-first century and said it was easy money-making in today's market economy. The other trainers were likewise overly friendly and nice to the potential new recruits. Admittedly, the aura of importance, confidence, independence, and charisma that these people radiated was hard to resist.

The rhetoric of movement, new business models, and success, and slogans such as 'it all depends on you' were powerful marketing tools at SM which fit Astana's built environment with its new glittering architecture. Astana became an active background that allowed such businesses to flourish. In my view, therefore, the success of *setevoi marketing* would not have been possible without the convincing image of Astana as a city of endless opportunities. In this, *setevoi marketing* embodied the hopes and aspirations of people. It was not only the state that was trying to create the image of a globally oriented Astana, but also the city's residents were being increasingly influenced by such discourse. The narratives of flow and diversity, and references to other cities linked Astana to discourses of urban visions elsewhere. Ivan's story illustrates this.

Ivan was in his early twenties, a Russian male, who moved to Astana from a village close to Karaganda eight months ago prior to our meeting in order to promote the products sold through Tiens Group. Our first encounter took place in 2009 in the office of Tiens Group, where he became suspicious of me because I was asking other recruits questions in the hallway. When Ivan approached me, he seemed overly confident for his age. He was dressed in a black business suit and tried to give the impression that he was a serious and an intimidating person. However, I sensed that he was stressed and uneasy. After I assured him that I was not a journalist and had no intention of questioning him about the company's 'business activities,' he became friendlier. He was most likely sent over by his supervisor to see what I was asking the people in the hallway. When I said that I was a researcher, Ivan became calmer and wanted to be interviewed as well. I agreed, but suspected it would be a formal interview, where he would try to fend off any suspicion of fraud in the business.

Ivan's goal was to become a successful businessman through the pyramid scheme at Tiens Group. He said that, in the past, Astana was a 'big village' with its old Soviet apartment blocks. Before moving to Astana, he looked at the official Astana website to learn about recent developments, the population growth, the newest architecture, and the potential that the city offered for newcomers and visitors, he claimed. His hometown Karaganda, in contrast, is famous for its coal-mining industry and miners. In Soviet times, it was and still remains a significant industrial town in the north of Kazakhstan, 200 kilometers south of Astana. Ivan was born in the small mining village called Shakhtinskoe, which is surrounded by eight other coalmines, where he lived until he finished high school and went to Karaganda to study. Ivan studied to be an electrician. However, he never worked at this profession, but instead started doing business with *setevoi marketing* in Karaganda. His father was a retired miner. Ivan did not want to follow the footsteps of his father, but rather wanted to create a different future for himself.

In the course of our conversation, it became clear that Ivan's mission of winning new clients for *setevoi marketing* was intricately connected to Astana as a new place with unlimited opportunities. Ivan was convinced that Tiens Group would be successful in Astana, "I understood that the city offers opportunities. Its population is growing fast and unofficially almost one million people live here. It means the city is developing. *Priezzhie* are coming from all over the country. People don't just come to the capital. They are after big money." In addition, Astana was even more beautiful than Ivan had imagined; he was fascinated:

> For twenty years, I lived in the Karaganda region. And then I also lived in Novosibirsk. And even after that, you look and compare them to Astana. You realize that they are all gray in terms of how they look. In Karaganda, also in Novosibirsk, it is a bit grayish and here everything is bright and festive and new, and new! Everything is extraordinary, something different. Just look at the Titanic Building, Northern Radiance, Bayterek, and the Ak Orda Presidential Palace! They are really cool. Well, all this fascinates you! And you know such beautiful buildings probably only exist in Dubai. No other capital in the world can boast being such a pretty capital as ours. The new houses are all so special and, as far as I know, Chinese, Italian, and even French companies have built them.

Ivan was convinced by the new look of Astana. This image dominated not only official narratives but also charmed young and old, affluent and impoverished people, alike. The spectacular architecture was visible and tangible. For Ivan, Astana opened up a different world, where he felt empowered and challenged to discover new things and new lifestyles and be a part of something special that other cities in Kazakhstan or even in Russia did not offer. In this, the built materiality was not only a passive background, but as Massey states, the city space enabled and restricted new hierarchies, temporalities, spatialities, and identities (1984.: 6). It was mixture of old and new and yet other constellations that offered something completely different. Ivan said:

> The Left Bank is something extraordinary with the fountains and monuments all lighted at night. I spend all my free time there taking walks. Here on the Right Bank, I like the river bank promenade. My sister was visiting me with her son from Karaganda. It was their first time in Astana. They liked it a lot, especially Chupa–Chups [a brand of lollipop; meaning the Bayterek monument]. Everyone calls it Chupa-Chups. My nephew likes lollipops a lot so it is something close to him. It is like the business card of Astana. No one else in the world has anything like it. The French have their Eiffel Tower, Russia has the Kremlin, and the Chinese have their Great Wall and we in Kazakhstan have Chupa-Chups! In short, we can declare to the world this is what we have! People admire this city. In fact, I haven't seen anything prettier than Astana in my life.

Although Ivan had already started working with Tiens Group while living in Karaganda, in Astana he acquired even more confidence and inspiration. The following is a fragment from my interview with him that shows the mindset and attitude he thought appropriate for a person to succeed in Astana.

Ivan: I never worked at my profession. I finished my studies and was immediately involved in *setevoi marketing* because we live in a country with lots of opportunities. I think one needs to look and choose the best ways to realize one's goals. You can't stand still in one place. You see our president is moving forward and our capital is developing. Just like that, we need to strive and move ahead as well. Those who come to Astana today must search for opportunities. They should not wait for the president to sign a law, for example, that gives every person housing. It is silly to expect that. Every person must solve his problems on his own.

KO: Can anyone realize his or her goals in Astana?

Ivan: I know how to realize mine. Those who search will find. You know, on August 19, it will be nineteen years since the Soviet Union ceased to exist. But some people have

not yet fully grasped that; they do not want to change and they sit and wait until someone brings them something or makes something happen for them. When a person takes responsibility for his life, his life will start to change, regardless of where he lives today and what he does.

KO: So a person can control many things in his life?

Ivan: No, a person can control his life 100 percent! Today everything depends on you and how much you want to achieve. You can do it. But if you wait, then you will wait all your life! Our president gave us a lot of freedom in this regard, if you compare Kazakhstan to other countries. It is the mentality [mentalitet] of people that needs to change.

KO: What problems did you face in Astana and how did you solve them?

Ivan: You know I didn't have any problems in Astana. Not really. Well, everyone has problems, but these problems have solutions. So they are not problems, but tasks! This is our life, our path. A human being cannot live without problems.

KO: You sound just like the film, The Secret!

Ivan: [laughs] We don't need to read books or see films to know about the principle that thoughts become reality. But not everyone knows how to apply this technique. And The Secret has nothing to do with it.

Ivan's self-reliance rhetoric about controlling one's life 100 percent was strongly influenced by the training at Tiens Group. Each new recruit had a supervisor who interviewed him or her during the first meeting. During my first interview, my supervisor told me to watch the film, The Secret, which was produced in 2006 in the U.S. It is a motivational movie about the 'laws of attraction,' which tries to convince people that they can make their wishes come true by repeatedly imagining positive outcomes. In this way, a person 'attracts' the desired outcome through the power of positive thinking. While talking to Ivan, I thought that he was directly quoting from the movie, since I had watched the film the previous day and it was fresh in my mind. When I mentioned that he sounded just like the movie, both of us started laughing. But Ivan quickly turned serious again and admitted that, in fact, he had watched it several times and he liked it, despite some ridiculous scenes, like the one with an elephant sitting in a room. When I asked Ivan what problems he faced upon moving to Astana, he stated that he did not pay attention to negative things and did not complain about hardships, "I

am an independent entrepreneur and I am not afraid of how expensive Astana is. I am the kind of person, to be honest, who doesn't pay attention to negative things. I try to see only the positive sides of things, and to look for advantages in every situation. I see the positive sides." Clearly, his positive attitude was influenced by this movie, in which problems become solvable tasks, dreams become realizable and imagination turned into aspirations that require immediate action. Finally, for Ivan, this was a radical break from Soviet ways of thinking and living. Nowadays, one should not rely on the state anymore; one should not even rely on one's networks of relatives and friends. In fact, Ivan said that he did not have friends after having lived in Astana for eight months. He had 'business partners,' by which he meant other Tiens Group distributors.

Furthermore, The Secret presents interviews with allegedly famous and successful people from the U.S., who achieved what they wanted through applying the 'rules of attraction.' Ivan did not need to look far, however, because for him President Nazarbayev was a direct source of inspiration and, just like the capital the president built, the Astanaian needs to move forward to realize his dreams. Ivan calls the president his 'inspirational leader':

> I try to be on the Left Bank at least once every two weeks and go up the Bayterek monument and 'shake hands' with the president.[24] [laughs] I like greeting the president because I have a dream to really shake hands with the presidents of Kazakhstan and Russia. This is at least a start…I am proud today to be born in Kazakhstan and I am proud that President Nazarbayev has such a vision for life in general. He is a big leader. In fact, I've seen many interviews with him and when he talks about Astana – his dream, his own creation, his miracle, you see how much he invested in Astana.

Here, we can see that Ivan, a young man, wanted to be strong and masculine like the 'Leader' himself and longed to shake hands with the president. This handshake would have meant to Ivan gaining part of Nazarbayev's aura of strength and success. Nazarbayev was a like a father figure for young men and women like Ivan. Nazarbayev writes in one of his books,

[24] Bayterek is a monument and observation tower, 105 meters tall. It offers a panorama of the Left Bank and the rest of Astana. It symbolizes a tree holding a golden egg, which stands for a magical tree of life, where the Simurgh bird laid its egg. On top of the monument, there is a gilded print of the right hand of President Nazarbayev on a pedestal. Visitors love to place their hand in the imprint and make a wish.

"Thousands of young boys and girls go to the new capital in search of opportunity…Citizens have developed faith in themselves and their strengths, as well as an awareness of the fact that the future…can and must be built with one's own two hands" (2006: 357, cited in Laszczkowski 2012: 158). His message is about being a strong person who takes control of his life, like Nazarbayev gained control of the country.

Listening to the seminar on the first day of the training, I was surprised to see how much of it was borrowed from popular American narratives about self-help and self-creation. The presentations were about taking responsibility for one's life. Moreover, this ethos of the self-reliant, enterprising individual is what defines migrants, who globally contribute to the celebration of neoliberal subjectivities (Glick-Schiller and Simsek-Caglar 2011). The dire consequences of a neoliberal agenda are evident in the state's withdrawal of public services and their replacement by cheap labor migrants (ibid. 16). Ivan was similar to these migrants, who participate in facilitating and legitimizing neoliberal global processes (ibid.: 73). Broadly referring to state pullback and the increased marketization of social and economic life, neoliberalism is "in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by private property rights, free markets and free trade" (Harvey 2005: 2). There is an ever-growing body of literature on neoliberalism and the growing inequality and "self-responsibilization" that lead to neoliberal labor, which is "flexible, cheap, uprooted, mobile and kinless, and individualized" (Allison and Piot 2014: 3-4). Tiens Group distributors comprise people in an insecure neoliberal labor regime.

I also had a conversation with a potential recruit at Tiens Group, Erjan, a 29-year-old young Kazakh man from a village located 100 kilometers south of Astana. While we were sitting, drinking a cup of tea, during the break after the second day of training, he said:

> Well, how to say, sometimes I think about going back to my village. But I don't know. I already lost five years here. I want to achieve results. I want to buy something. Now I set myself the goal of buying a car. I will work hard to achieve this goal. I told my parents I will achieve something in this city and only then will come back home. I have gotten used to the city. There are many opportunities here and one needs to catch them and not miss out. How can one not love Astana!? You come to love it after five years. It feeds you, clothes you. I wouldn't say it is hard here, maybe I got used to, maybe I just like living in a city. It is more interesting here. Yes, I want to earn more stars [credits] in this *setevoi marketing*.

In Astana, Erjan had pursued many avenues. He worked in the construction sector before the financial crisis hit in 2008. When that stopped paying, he became a bartender. Afterwards, he left this job and became a security guard because the salary was higher and one could work fewer days and more nights. But still, that was not ideal for Erjan since at this job as well, he was paid less than promised. So, he was seeking yet another promising job in Astana when I met him. But, he was just exchanging one unstable and poorly paid job for another. At the time we spoke, it was *setevoi marketing*. If he failed there, the search would continue and he would keep trying. In the meantime, he wanted to explore all the opportunities Astana offered.

During the trainings at Tiens Group, recruits like Erjan were told to write down their visions and dreams, then, their concrete goals and desires. These goals were then divided into short-term, medium-term, and long-term. The recruits were supposed to imagine not just any car or house, but a perfect representation including minute details such as color, size, and design. Like an imprint, this representation should be stored in one's memory and recalled and remembered every day for self-motivation. Indeed, a visible, tangible reminder was recommended as even more effective than a mental image. One could draw or print the image and hang it on the wall next to the refrigerator, for instance. As Kirmse points out in his ethnographic observations of Osh, in neighboring Kyrgyzstan, the youth there actively craft styles and identities taken from a multitude of images and options from global media (2013: 165). In this process, fantasies and imaginations are a central part of their lives, such that they dream of acquiring status items like expensive cars (ibid.: 156). Only a few could actually afford these desired items. In contrast, Astana was full of Western goods, which then were no

longer just fantasies, but became part of everyday reality for many. *Setevoi marketing* offered a step forward in this sense by providing a concrete method for acquiring these things; instead of idly dreaming or fantasizing, one had to take immediate action. As Appadurai's (1996) suggests, people were being asked to integrate imagination into their very concrete, everyday life situations. Astana's hyper-image was like this perfect picture of a desired item, but on a larger scale and 'alive.' Its proximity was irresistible and made it a direct object of aspiration for newcomers.

In sum, Ivan's aspirations and pyramid schemes were indirectly supported by Astana's discourse as the 'city of opportunities,' a narrative that officials as well as residents readily reproduced. In addition, the new architecture instilled overconfidence in newcomers like Ivan, and provided a background that gave *setevoi marketing* legitimacy and credibility, making it even more fascinating, positive, and promising than it would have seemed in a different context. In turn, *setevoi marketing* reinforced the discourse of the 'city of opportunities' where dreams materialized. Both Astana and *setevoi marketing* reinforced each other, simultaneously playing on imagination and reality. Ivan's actions and behavior were informed by the seductive built environment from which he tried to capitalize through promoting his company's pyramid scheme. In this, Astana's built environment was far from passive; it actively shaped experience. Seeing the spatial as an important intermediary means that the design and architecture of a built environment play an important role in the ways people interact (Gottdiener and Budd 2005: 140). People take in the qualities of their surrounding environments and, in turn, project them back out into space, which makes people and their environments mutually connected (Low and Lawrence-Zuniga 2003: 14–15). Ivan noted, "I think people are also changing today and they are looking for business opportunities, finding new ways to develop them. Kazakhstan does not hinder you in this matter; Astana is especially open to entrepreneurial activities. Trade and commerce are close to Astana's spirit! People want to make money here."

Similar to the housing 'bubble' in Astana, *setevoi marketing* was likely to collapse when saturation was reached and there were no more new recruits to acquire. The only winners then would be the 'early birds,' who were able to capitalize on the commissions acquired from new recruitments. For the time being, Ivan was able to make some profits from the Tiens Group, selling their products, and he could afford to live comparatively well in Astana. I asked how much Ivan paid for a one-room apartment in the center of the old town. He said '500 exchange units' [uslovnyh edinits], which was the term people like him at Tiens Group used for U.S. dollars. The distributors created their own little universe where money almost magically multiplied by itself. Ivan was a living example used to convince newcomers that this pyramid scheme worked. He was a newcomer himself and did not have any relatives or friends who helped him in Astana. Managing everything himself, Ivan projected the image of not only a successful person, but also someone who thought differently about what it takes to achieve success. Ivan's lifestyle included taking taxis instead of riding public transport, living alone instead of renting a shared apartment, buying food in supermarkets instead of going to the bazaars, and being positive and optimistic about the future. *Setevoi marketing* combined fake and seemingly credible schemes for doing business. At the end, the company seemed real and the products they sold to consumers really existed.

Ivan's example points to broader societal changes in Kazakhstan. During the early years of transition from socialism in the 1990s, the sudden rise of a rich entrepreneurial class made people skeptical about the market economy. Many regarded these newly rich as corrupt because they were "shockingly economically successful" and no one believed that one could become this rich in an honest way (Humphrey 2002: 177). However, gone are the days when socialist thinking made trading and selling, with the motto "trade is bad, work is good," immoral (Verdery 1996: 98). More so, economic freedom supported the flourishing of small- and middle-size, business entrepreneurial initiatives and the establishment of the private service sector. By the time I conducted my research, the market economy was widely

accepted. The Kazakhstan state promoted entrepreneurship and competitiveness (Adams and Rustemova 2009). People wanted to get rich without feeling bad about it. One did not necessarily have to work hard in order to get rich; one just needed to know how to make money, as the trainers tried to convince people at the Tiens Group seminars. Verdery describes the popularity of pyramid speculative schemes in Romania in the early years of transition to the market economy. The biggest was Caritas, which was hugely successful, involving two to four million depositors, comprising 10% of the population (1996). The founder of Caritas was Stoica, who was seen as a saint figure. People put their faith in Caritas seeing it as "salvation and hope" (ibid.: 171–178). This was a time when new thinking was just about to emerge about money, market, and work after the disintegration of the socialist system. Speculative schemes seem to flourish in special periods when radical breaks occur or reevaluations of the previous social norms take place – periods which could be described as liminal. Moreover, these times present a perfect opportunity for charismatic people to emerge and establish themselves as 'saviors' or leaders, as we can see in the case of President Nazarbayev, too. He presented himself as a person with a vision for the whole nation; ordinary people like Ivan were captivated by the aura of the president.

Ivan's case illustrates how a neoliberal economic agenda was spreading in Kazakhstan. Bissenova also notes that, "much as in the United States, Kazakhstan has acquired a neoliberal social vision and a set of personal dreamworlds (not unlike "the American Dream") that, together, have been a culprit in, and have significantly contributed to, the creation of the housing bubble and the ensuing meltdown" (2012: 118). Astana's discourse supported this neoliberal subjectivity, as the city was presented as a space where one could explicitly succeed, primarily based on individual risk-taking and self-reliance. It was even more important to poor individuals, like Erjan, to embrace Astana's image as a 'city of opportunities' because with that came the belief that *setevoi marketing* could be a real opportunity, even if they did not have special qualifications, skills, or experience. However,

the other side of neoliberal ideology was that if a person fails, he or she was personally responsible. On my next trip to Astana in 2010, I observed that similar pyramid schemes were actively recruiting people, as I discovered from numerous newspaper advertisements. I went to an interview this time as well and the subsequent training was more professional than it had been the previous year. The office was located in a newly built fancy business center on the fourteenth floor. The trainer was a young Kazakh man, who made a nice presentation. Apparently, there was still a market for pyramid schemes; however, there were not as many people attending this time.

Nurturing the New Elite: Bolashaq Scholars

For Ivan, *setevoi marketing* was a way to participate in the "city of the future." Other people from different social and professional backgrounds made use of quite different tools and resources. Here I want to introduce Asyl, a graduate of the government-sponsored, highly admired study-abroad Bolashaq International Scholarship for top students. In contrast to shallow confidence without much in the way of real skills to back it up, as was the case of promoters of *setevoi marketing* like Ivan, young Bolashaq people spoke perfect English and had studied abroad. It showed in their dresses, speech, manners, and behavior. They knew what they were talking about and did not have to rely on films like The Secret to shape their views because they could boast firsthand experience in the West. They are the Zolotaya Molodezh [golden youth] or future elite. Some were children of the wealthy; others had educated family backgrounds. If one were to generalize, one could say that these young people were smart, hardworking, and very ambitious. The question is what kind of future Astana offered to these young and bright people.

Bolashaq, which tellingly translates as 'future,' was created by the government to invest in creating the human capital and knowhow lacking in Kazakhstan after independence. Bolashaq was supposed to be a highly competitive scholarship program, which allowed all students to participate in an entry exam to win this prestigious award to pursue undergraduate

studies, Masters, or PhDs abroad. Bolashaq started in 1994 and sent up to the twenty best students of a cohort to study at foreign universities each year. In return, they had to work for five years in Kazakhstan for the government. The range of hosting countries was impressive and included Australia, China, Russia, and Singapore, in addition to EU countries, the U.S., and Canada. The study programs that were especially desired were in natural sciences, public policy and administration, economics, and management. Starting from 2004, about 3,000 students were sent to study abroad each year.

Nazarbayev partly justified moving the capital to Astana as necessary to educate a new class of progressive civil servants to develop the whole country in the new era of market economy and capitalism (Nazarbayev 2005: 20–23). The capital is to nurture this new generation of elites, who were trained at world-class universities and committed to materialize the president's vision to modernize the state apparatus (ibid.). It was on the alumni of the Bolashaq program that Nazarbayev placed his hope for reforming the country to make it one of the 50 most competitive states in the world by 2050. His quote on the Bolashaq website says, "I am deeply convinced that Bolashaq will become one of the most important 'breakthrough projects.'"[25] In a similar vein, Koch claims that Nazarbayev University and Bolashaq are "positive tactics of nation-building directed to raise patriotic/normal citizens with a committed affinity to the state and the homeland" (2015: 96). However, there were cases of corruption, since rich parents wanted their low-performing children to be selected for Bolashaq, which reduced the prestige of the program (Koch 2015: 86–87). In 2011, Bolashaq stopped its undergraduate and Master's programs. Many thought this was linked to the opening of Nazarbayev University in Astana; the funds were redirected there. It was speculated that Nazarbayev University was to supplement the entire Bolashaq program in the near future by offering world-class, Western type education in Kazakhstan. Still between

[25] Retrieved on 6 May, 2013 from http://bolashak.kz/en

1994 and 2010, about 15,000 students studied abroad as Bolashaq scholarship holders (Koch 2015).

The popularity of foreign-funded scholarships is well demonstrated by Kirmse among students in Osh, Kyrgyzstan. To be sure, due to the high level of competition, only a few get to study abroad through these programs; nevertheless, the sheer possibility galvanized hundreds of students to apply and find out more about such opportunities (Kirmse 2013: 239–247). In the same way, Bolashaq mobilized Kazakhstani youth countrywide to compete for this government scholarship; the best of the best took part in it, be they students from ordinary schools or private institutes. If successful, they belonged to a privileged group, gaining respect and acknowledgement from parents and relatives. It was a 'gateway to success,' in short.

Asyl was a 24-year-old Kazakh female, a Bolashaq alumna, whom I met in Astana in 2010 during my second fieldtrip. She owned a car and an apartment in Astana. She was originally from East Kazakhstan, from the city of Ust-Kamenogorsk and came to Astana in 2006 to work for the U.S. Embassy. In her hometown, she finished her studies in economics and management. Asyl was selected as a finalist for Bolashaq's Master's program in 2008 and studied economics and finance at the American University in Washington, DC in the U.S. for two years. She had returned just a few months before I interviewed her in September 2010. Her American experience was very fresh and she was still readjusting to life in Astana. But she was already working for the Institute for Economic Research under the Ministry of Finance in Astana. The Bolashaq Alumni Association maintained a database of its graduates and cooperated with government structures, which in turn sent job openings to Bolashaq alumni. The Alumni Association called Asyl and offered her a position working for the Ministry of Finance as a monitoring expert for an innovation project called Map of Industrialization, which was one of the government's latest modernization projects. Bolashaq

required its graduates to work in Kazakhstan after their scholarship ended. Some graduates I knew worked for the private sector as well.

Asyl told me that her work was about evaluating how new investments in various regions of the country were being implemented; working from Astana, she and her colleagues analyzed and evaluated the outcomes of such projects. She was quite supportive of the idea that the state should invest money to support existing and new start-up business initiatives. For instance, if in a rural area, an entrepreneur wanted to expand and modernize a business like a chicken farm, he or she could apply for state money at the akimiyat [local municipal office]. Then, the regional akimiyat evaluate the project. If the project received support at that level, it then went to the Ministry of Finance for final approval. State, as well as private, companies could apply for such financial assistance. Asyl was learning how this innovation project worked and how it was supposed to help boost the modernization of the Kazakhstan economy. Nonetheless, she was critical of the Map of Industrialization project because it seemed to fail to yield the promised innovations. Asyl said the job was boring and the private sector offered more momentum and risk. She said:

> After all, I need vigor and I am missing it here. Everything is ready here, we have all the readymade data, and even these ideas are not that innovative. They [the Ministry] have just translated them from English to Russian. I look at these translations and see no innovation there! Here, they tell you they are implementing creative ideas, but these ideas were already experimented with somewhere else. Well, by innovation maybe they mean that these ideas are being integrated for the first time to a Kazakh local setting?

During the two years Asyl was gone, Astana had changed. She commented, "First of all I see that there is a huge education gap between certain groups of people at work." Many of Asyl's coworkers, who had never studied or travelled abroad, behaved differently from her and she felt like she was living in a 'different world,' as she put it. In addition, she compared her working environment at the ministry to the American Embassy:

> I am used to working with foreigners and have certain expectations. Now, working for a Kazakhstani company, I see that human resources are not valued. They don't know how to motivate people. The only incentive is salary. Foreign companies motivate

> their employers using different incentives and it is a smarter strategy. They provide learning opportunities and give trainings and benefits, while the salaries might be the same. Here, people talk only about their salaries; they only care about money. So I experienced a double shock. First, I had got used to customer service in a global city like Washington and, second, I was working in a foreign environment. Now I have to get used to working in a Kazakhstani company in Kazakhstan.

The interview was in Russian but she mixed in English words frequently; she talked about 'incentives and benefits' in English. Asyl said that after gaining experience at her present job, she would move to the private banking sphere or a think tank to do research.

Like Ivan, Asyl wanted to have a successful career in Astana; however, she relied on actual hard work, knowledge, and skills, unlike Ivan. Despite her young age, Asyl already had exact plans for the next ten years. She envisioned working in Astana for about five years, and then, when she turned twenty-nine, she wanted to start a PhD at the American University, where she did her master's degree. After finishing her PhD, she would then come back to Kazakhstan at the age of thirty-four. Asyl was no doubt very ambitious and knew what she wanted to achieve in life. I asked her when she planned to get married and have a family. Her answer was very practical. She said if her husband and family would not stand in the way of her career, then she would combine the two. It was very important to her that her future husband supported and understood her aspirations, "I don't want to miss my chance. I already invested many years, so I will not stop halfway." It was surprising to me how mature and professional she seemed at the age of twenty-four. Certainly, she was not an exception since the social environment she was exposed to at the Toastmasters Club was equally demanding and full of pressure for its members to have successful careers. Young people at the Toastmasters Club were also mostly Bolashaq graduates and they all had big plans for the future, as will be discussed later.

During our interview, Asyl wore jeans and a T-shirt. With her long hair and a friendly smile she looked no more than twenty years old. I was expecting to hear fun stories about life in Washington, where she explored American college life away from the watchful eyes of her

parents. Instead, I felt like I was talking to a thirty-something-year-old who was very much concentrated on her studies and utterly self-disciplined. It seemed that she spent all her free time in the U.S. studying. There was no talk of traveling, making friends, exploring American culture, dating, or enjoying private life. Asyl did mention leisure, but it was as a kind of investment in self-improvement, such as playing sports. She seemed to have internalized a market-oriented approach to life in general. The word 'efficiency' came up very often in the course of our conversation. For instance, Asyl claimed that when people work hard, they must also enjoy quality leisure time, which, in turn, would curb the crime rate, since people would be using their free time 'effectively.' Perhaps she was trying to impress me with her seriousness. Our conversation was rather formal, consisting of a one-time interview which lasted a bit more than one hour. But clearly, career and job were priorities for her. Her leisure time was spent on self-improvement, like attending the Toastmasters Club or reading books on econometrics. And finally, I was five minutes late to our interview in the center of the old town set for six o'clock in a café and exactly at six o'clock she called me to ask where I was. In comparison, my other Kazakhstani informants or friends were sometimes half an hour late for an appointment, which did not bother them much. For Asyl, time management was imperative.

Asyl's friends were like her as well, ambitious and hard working. They had high demands and their family and friends had high expectations of them, too. Discussing her peers, Asyl said that people paid a lot of attention to self-development, especially her Bolashaq peers. Their motivation was to study abroad and afterwards to look for further training. If they were over thirty, they already had families and, if not, they were feeling pressure to get married from their relatives. So it was important that one succeeded before turning thirty, especially for men, in order to provide for their family. Asyl was trying to find out what her Bolashaq, as well as non-Bolashaq, peers were doing in Astana, their social life, goals, and how they lived. She said:

> In Astana, there are more opportunities and I noticed that for people here their career is the first priority. I always hear people saying 'I need to have a career.' I think this is fine because, if we want to be globally competitive, we need to have this kind of attitude towards work; otherwise, we might hinder the development of our country. Of course, one should not be a workaholic. But one needs to develop a strong work ethic as a lifestyle in order to compete with others.

Asyl thought Kazakhstan did not sufficiently value its young professionals and, therefore, some bright students found better jobs abroad and did not come back to Kazakhstan. Another issue was the 'conflict of mentalities,' as she put it, because people who did not work hard could still get promoted in Kazakhstan. It was clear that she meant corruption and how 'lazy' people obtained jobs through relatives and friends. In Astana, chinovniki [bureaucrats] were said to lead lazy lives, displaying their wealth and status. Asyl claimed that chinovniki were disliked by Almaty residents because they did not produce anything, but only consumed and lived off the revenues produced by other parts of the country, just like 'parasites.' Asyl compared herself to her peers in Astana and felt that she did not belong to the mainstream.

> I am actually living and moving in a different world. And it is hard to orient myself to Astana's lifestyle. Astana's style is glamorous, high heels and, in summer, lowcut dresses for women [laughs]. Girls care about their looks. I am more modest in this sense. I don't do my nails and don't change my hairstyle often. Maybe it shocks some of my colleagues. Like in other capital cities, there is arrogance here. And I think we need to get rid of it. I still need to get used to life here. Ambitions are superficial here, like traveling to Dubai, driving luxury cars, having big new apartments, going out to expensive clubs. This is the lifestyle of the Kazakh elite. But, on the other hand, we have a different type of elite, too, who think about long-term goals and want to make real changes here. So we have two kinds of elite.

Asyl implied her Bolashaq peers were this not-so-superficial, second type and she certainly identified herself with that group. She was critical of the 'other' Kazakh youth who led carefree lives, engrossed in conspicuous consumption. Her Bolashaq peers were better, compared to this group, because they cared about Kazakhstan and were hardworking. With this, Asyl put her Bolashaq peers in a special category, which had little in common with other privileged Kazakh youth; they were moving in a 'different world.' For instance, Asyl's good friend came back from Great Britain, in spite of her high salary, in order to gain experience in

Astana and more importantly, because she wanted to contribute to the development of Kazakhstan. Asyl continued:

> I have many friends who want to make real reforms in Kazakhstan. They have deep respect for their ancestors. They don't just want to escape abroad, but want to stay here and make Kazakhstan better. Well, for Bolashaq graduates, it is required that they come back and work for the state. And they have good chances to work here, for example, like me in the Innovation Project.

Asyl supported the need for reforms in Kazakhstan, but did not really question Nazarbayev's regime. She wanted to make Kazakhstan developed under the existing regime and political arrangement. Her respect for ancestors signified an attachment to authority in a broad sense, which could be extended to Nazarbayev himself, too. At her job, it was self-evident that everyone supported the president, including herself. At the same time, she felt there was more freedom in Astana than in other cities. For instance, at her home university in Ust-Kamenogorsk, students were required to register as members of the president's party, Nur Otan, while she felt no such pressure in Astana. Asyl linked this freedom to the architecture of Astana:

> There is more freedom here than in Almaty or in other cities because all this space and the architecture itself forces this freedom upon you. Like when I am walking along the fountains with lots of free space, I feel free to think and reflect. The spirit of freedom is created and the city is also tolerant. I mean it is not that free, but relatively free. Well, I have lived in a super free country [the U.S.].

This 'freedom' was devoid of political meaning and reduced to mere physical empty space, allowing one to avoid city crowds and congestion. Both Asyl and her peers and the other group, who were more superficial than Bolashaq peers imagine Astana as the 'new,' developed world connected to globalized lifestyles and consumption patterns. Asyl was chasing a neoliberal dream of making a promising career with a quest for self-perfection, while the other group expressed itself mostly through consumption. Both groups were captured in following narrowly defined, individualized ambitions, either career-building or consuming more, with limited opportunities for critical reflection on the development discourse behind Astana.

Astana's new built environment was supposed to mirror this new generation, since it was supposed to encourage desired, new behavior in its civil servants. This evokes the transformative aims of the Soviet Union, where cities were supposed to mold subjectivities to create a new Soviet person and a new society, as with the city of Magnitogorsk (Kotkin 1995: 18). We see a similar example of such social engineering through remolding urban space in Brasília, the modernist capital of Brazil, which was once meant to transform Brazilian society as a whole through a modernist architecture (Holston 1989). There is a tradition in believing that modernist architecture can transform political structure and the habitus of emerging societies with universal principles of modernity, as evidenced by Brasilia and Dhaka, and, as I argue, more recently by Astana (Ong 2011: 213). Astana's architecture was partly designed to meet the needs and desires of its new civil servants, who wanted to enjoy a clean and comfortable city with little congestion and modern shopping malls. In return, civil servants were supposed to transform into efficient and globally competitive, loyal workers.

However, Astana did not live up to the expectations of new civil servants like Asyl. She realized that, being a model Kazakhstan city, Astana was somewhat at odds with practices on the ground. For example, Asyl could not afford many things in Astana with her salary, even though she had a good job at the Ministry of Finance. Asyl had hobbies, like dancing salsa and doing yoga, but she complained about how expensive these hobbies were. Her visits to restaurants on the Left Bank were rather rare, "Only when I am invited, I go," she continued, laughing. There were no affordable alternatives to these expensive goods and services. She claimed, "Entertainment is expensive. We have everything, but it is hardly affordable. There is not enough competition and the youth suffer. For example, going to a. gym is very expensive here. The whole service sector is expensive."

She said that visitors actually saw that, behind the façade of all these beautiful buildings, there was only a very narrow middle class, in terms of salaries. Asyl continued her thought, "In fact these fancy buildings are meant to serve the rich. We have many lower

middle-class people, but only few upper middle-class people. I think I am lower middle class." Asyl mentioned that she earned twice as much when working at Human Resources at the American Embassy three years earlier, as compared to her current salary at the ministry, which was about $500. Asyl was still better off than many of her colleagues, who earned even less than she did, while performing the same amount of work. With Astana's astronomical rents, someone like Asyl, who owned an apartment and a car, was considered rather affluent. Her parents had bought her an apartment in Astana, so they were well off too. Unlike her colleagues, she did not have to pay rent. Some were paying 80% of their salaries only in rent. Some were coping by living with relatives. Middle-ranking civil servants and public employees, such as doctors and teachers, received only small salaries. This is whom Asyl was referring to when she said we have many people who belong to the lower middle class. These people were underpaid, but expected to work hard by the government. Nonetheless, Astana's built environment included projects to support state workers. Despite the low salaries, what kept civil servants attached to their work were incentives, such as the chance to apply for state-subsidized apartments and other bonuses.

While critical of the state's use of public funds on extravagant construction projects, Asyl, at the same time, claimed that Astana needed these projects for guests and tourists. The latest project under consideration for state sponsorship was Abu Dhabi Plaza, an entertainment and shopping mall on the Left Bank. It would have been the tallest building in Central Asia and would have created work and business offices for investors, Asyl suggested. I asked her if she thought it was a good investment of the state budget:

> Yes. I see many benefits. Well, when I worked for the American Embassy, the Americans complained of the lack of entertainment places in Astana. There was hardly anything here back then. And now, instead of traveling abroad, people can spend their money in Astana. There should be other infrastructural improvements parallel to that, though. But we need these entertainment centers because there is demand for them and Astana is growing. On the other hand, small American cities do not have huge malls. Only big cities like Las Vegas or New York do.

Due to the financial crisis, the construction of the Abu Dhabi Plaza was postponed. Besides, Astana already had at least three big entertainment and shopping-malls on the Left Bank. Even if they were expensive, it was still important to have more of such places, argued Asyl. Foreigners frequented these places, so there was some demand. The buildings were designed to impress foreigners and guests in Astana, to show them how modern and beautiful Astana was. Asyl said that she would take tourists to these expensive entertainment malls and restaurants, to the Presidential Museum, but she doubted that tourists would come to Astana only to see the Pyramid or Khan Shatyr. Her attitude was rather common: People thought that foreigners working in Astana and guests should have opportunities for entertainment and luxury goods that they could not afford themselves.

Asyl liked the transformations in Astana; however, she was also critical of the decision to move the capital. She said that one could have built all these new buildings in Almaty as well, or in yet other cities. For Asyl, there was a group of elites who benefited enormously from this project of building the new capital. She called them 'lobbyists,' an American term which she applied to Kazakhstan. She was convinced that these elites influenced the decisions of the president. Tellingly, Asyl did not criticize or mention anything negative about the president himself or his decisions.

When I asked her about political life in Kazakhstan, she hesitated to answer. She referred to her limited knowledge of politics and stated she was more interested in economic reforms. Similar to Ivan, Asyl also praised President Nazarbayev:

> I want to read the book, Nazarbayev and the Making of Kazakhstan, by Jonathan Aitken. It is the latest book by a British political scientist and he recounts many good things about Nazarbayev, like how he was able to put Kazakhstan on the 'right track.' I recently bought the book. I mean, our president really did accomplish many things, like nuclear disarmament, which earned him worldwide recognition, political and economic consolidation, the Bolashaq program, and winning OSCE chairmanship, and even helping Kyrgyzstan during the recent conflict in Osh!

Aitken's book is more a biography of Nazarbayev: about how he grew up the son of a shepherd, but achieved success in government bureaucracy due to his talent and skillful

handling of the disintegration of the Soviet Union, in comparison to others. Asyl said that Nazarbayev listened to foreign advisors in reforming the country. While perhaps not all of his decisions were correct, she added, there were tangible improvements over the past twenty years. She added, "It is too formal here. There is a lack of independent thinking. People do not think for themselves and are afraid to say their opinion. It is like this in all of Central Asia." This was significant, since Asyl thought that people first had to change and educate themselves to think independently and demand more reforms. This was rather common reasoning among certain young, progressive politicians in Central Asia: that the masses had to change their 'mentality' first and shed the old attitudes that hindered them from accepting democratic principles. Only then, could ordinary citizens actively participate in political life. At the end of our interview, Asyl stated that its architecture made Astana unique among all other Central Asian cities and also made Kazakhstan something special, an "expression of our nation's uniqueness," she put it, thus supporting the official discourse about Astana being the 'new face' of Kazakhstan. Thus Asyl justified not only government expenditures, but also its shortcomings such as limitations on political liberalization.

Fauve writes about the Bolashaq Effect, which refers to how graduates of the program, after returning from their studies abroad, talk with pride about their personal encounters with the president (2015: 119). They share their photos taken with Nazarbayev and post them on Facebook. Before they were selected, the students had to take a Kazakh language proficiency test and demonstrate their patriotism to Kazakhstan. In short, "[t]hey are encouraged to become a model professional patriotic citizen" (ibid.). In this, Bolashaq has contributed to the legitimization of Kazakhstan's regime. As in Asyl's case, these students tended to come from privileged families or from the cultural and political elite, and their parents were able to send their children to good schools with a special focus on foreign languages. In addition, parents had to own private property, which served as collateral to ensure that the students returned to Kazakhstan after their studies, as required by the program. Asyl showed what has been called

'Bolashaq syndrome,' which means having high expectations and demands and wanting to get a high-paying job immediately (Koch 2015: 87). Many Bolashaq alumni could not find satisfying jobs with competitive salaries upon their return, since Kazakhstan was simply not in a position to offer them all the benefits they expected. And with the increase in competition for jobs, many had to adjust to the realities of Kazakhstan (ibid.).

Finally, for Asyl, Astana was not just a place for career development, but a unique opportunity to directly participate in Kazakhstan's modernization project. She concluded:

> I want to see and follow this breakthrough in Kazakhstan; everyone is speaking of the Japanese miracle and the Asian Tiger Economies. I want to see how the same thing might happen in reality in Kazakhstan; no one can foresee the future. Maybe we will become among the top five countries [in the world] or maybe not. It is an experiment conducted here to achieve desired ends. Being part of this experiment is exciting, even if the future is uncertain. There might be surprises on the way, too. It is interesting to see if the miracle is going to happen, you know.

Supportive of the Bolashaq program, and her role as contributing to Kazakhstan's innovation project, Asyl saw it as once-in-a-lifetime chance and learning opportunity. For her, it was an 'experiment' to see where Kazakhstan might end up in the next twenty to thirty years. All in all, Asyl was enthusiastic about Kazakhstan's future. Most importantly, she was directly asked to assist in creating this future for her country and she was ready for the challenge. She knew that she was not alone and that her country granted Bolashaq graduates a unique chance to make valuable contributions. As mentioned above, young people wanted reform and to make Kazakhstan and Astana more developed, without changing the regime. This was even more visible with Bolashaq graduates, who, like Asyl, were readjusting to Kazakhstan's reality, after being inspired by their stay abroad. They created and cultivated their own social environment at the Toastmasters Club, as will be discussed in the next section.

Toastmasters and Self-Promotion

In order to understand Asyl's story better, a discussion of Astana's Toastmasters Club provides helpful insights. Actually, I met Asyl at a Toastmasters meeting in the fall 2010, where she became interested in my dissertation project and wanted to know more about it. I

found an information sheet about the Toastmasters in the newly built library on the Left Bank. At first, I thought it was an English language club. I decided to go to a meeting and took along a Kazakh friend and informant, Raima, a 26-year-old Kazakh woman, who was a newcomer from northern Kazakhstan. Raima did not speak English, but she could understand a bit and wanted to practice more. We found the Toastmasters office in a nice new building in the center of the old town. It was on a lively street surrounded with new apartments and business offices, which, however, looked completely empty. We entered the building and saw three young women waiting in the hallway. They told us that the Toastmasters was a place not for practicing English, but for improving one's public speaking and leadership skills in English language. Those who come here already spoke good English. New people could come and participate as guests and maybe become Toastmasters members later. Raima and I decided to stay and find out more about the club. Toastmasters International is a U.S.-headquartered nonprofit organization with about 300,000 members globally and almost 13,000 clubs located in 106 countries.[26] This includes local branches like the Astana Toastmasters, which was launched in 2010. There was a complicated manual on how to become a competent speaker, step by step. Awards were given and, at the end of the year, the best orators were nominated. On their webpage, the Toastmasters emphasize that they "contribute to building a community of leaders able to think critically…"[27] The website points out that, "In our learn-by-doing approach, we don't lecture our members about leadership skills – we give them responsibilities and ask them to lead." Toastmasters' activities are sponsored by businesses and government organizations worldwide.

The founder of Astana's Toastmasters was Samatbek, a Kazakh man in his early thirties. Himself a Bolashaq graduate from a university in the U.S., he was introduced to Toastmasters during his stay there. When he returned to Kazakhstan, inspired by this

[26] More information on Toastmasters Club to be found at: http://www.toastmasters.org/.
[27] Retrieved on 8 March 2014 from http://astanatoastmasters.wikispaces.com/.

experience, he decided to organize a Toastmasters Club in Astana, too. The members of the club met regularly, once a week. For each meeting, a few members of the club prepared a presentation and had to deliver a twenty-minute speech in front of an audience. Others members were seated around the table. Everything was structured and organized. Each member had a responsibility and an assigned seat; there was a timer, a chairperson, and a grammar corrector, meticulously noting every mistake the speaker made. Afterwards, the speeches were evaluated and comments made regarding the overall quality of presentation, grammar, and structure of the speech. Members had achieved different degrees of 'speaker titles' and could eventually attain a nomination for 'best speaker.' Twenty to forty people participated in each weekly meeting, including guests, but mostly no more than twenty people attended regularly, as I observed from visiting several meetings.

During the first meeting, Raima and I sat in the back of the room, where other guests were seated. It seemed the speakers enjoyed the attention of the guests. In addition, the guests also were given an opportunity to deliver a speech, after the official speeches were done. The whole atmosphere at the meetings seemed a bit staged and artificial. For one, there were lot of formalities involved, endless handshakes and smiles, and ways of saying 'thank you.' For people who accidently stepped in from the streets of Astana, like Raima and myself, it definitely looked surreal and ridiculous. It seemed like a club of happy people who had adopted some features of American culture with its excessive friendliness and borrowed a bit of the British debating tradition with rigid formalities and rules. Also, Toastmasters members gave the impression of being very serious; they were smartly dressed and behaved like professionals, speaking with perfect English, and sometimes an impressive British accent. Although their website stated that members practiced their speaking skills in Russian, as well as in Kazakh, the language used was mostly English when I attended their meetings. I rarely saw ethnic Russians at Toastmasters; most members were ethnic Kazakhs with a roughly equal number of males and females present.

During their speeches, members of Toastmasters fondly recounted their experiences abroad. For instance, one speaker studied at the Academy of Management in Astana and told of his recent travels to Singapore, the U.S., and the U.K. in the frame of an exchange program which included visiting the best schools in public policy. Another young man, who had studied in the U.K., recounted his plans to buy an apartment within two years from his personal savings. He was only twenty-three and said he was tired of living with his parents; he wanted 'independence.' In Kazakhstan and in the rest of Central Asia, young people depended upon their parents to acquire housing, due to the unstable economies and high youth unemployment (Roberts 2010). In such circumstances, claiming to be able to live separately from one's parents was an extremely significant move for young people, which not many could afford. Like Asyl, these members of the Toastmasters were mostly young professionals in their twenties or early thirties, who had studied abroad through Bolashaq or other exchange programs; some of them had parents who had financed their studies abroad. Still others were planning to go abroad for study or training. Many of them were already working for the government or for private banking or consulting firms and interacted with foreigners at work. They belonged to a new class of young elites in Kazakhstan, a privileged group. At one point at that first meeting, Raima became very uncomfortable. It was clear she felt 'out of place'; she wanted to leave but stayed until the end of the meeting because I stayed.

I was curious about Raima's impressions of the Toastmasters. Riding home on a bus with tired-looking, unsmiling people late that evening, I asked Raima what she thought of the event. She was quiet, thinking. After a moment, she asked, "Why do they all wear glasses?" I replied, "To look smart," with a smile on my face. Ignoring my sarcastic comment, Raima still contemplated something and then she turned to me and, with a serious look on her face, said, "I will not go to that place again." I sensed she had felt uncomfortable with these extremely friendly Toastmasters people; they were strange and alien to her. I asked her if she thought these people were pretentious. In a reflective tone she replied, "They all seem to have

this positive attitude, which they internalized and it has somehow become part of them." Raima seemed to be confused by their conspicuously positive attitude and constant smiling and tried hard to understand where it all came from. To be sure, their 'happy land' did not match up to Raima's experience in Astana. In fact, her experience was the exact opposite. People were cold to her and treated her harshly. Since Raima had no good connections or close relatives to help her out, she had to rely on herself. She rarely met strangers who were friendly and wanted to help. The Toastmasters Club was not the world familiar to her.

I attended several other meetings at the Toastmasters Club without Raima and participated in their discussions. Once they held a Japan Day, to which the Japanese Ambassador himself came and gave a speech in English. There was a Japanese delegation of several people with him, as well, and they all said they were impressed with the English skills of the young Kazakh Toastmasters. Another time, the topic of the meeting was Healthy Food. As a guest from Germany, I delivered a speech about sushi and described the eating habits of Berliners and the spread of organic shops and food in Germany. Everyone listened attentively and many were interested to learn more. Again, other meeting themes included environment protection, sports and hobbies, charity, fighting cancer, and several self-development-related topics. Needless to say, these were Western-influenced issues and had little relevance to what ordinary Kazakhstanis like my friend Raima, for example, cared about. Revealingly, the club members never talked about real political or social issues in Kazakhstan, such as housing problems, youth unemployment, or corruption. In this sense, they could be partly compared to the foreign donor community in neighboring Kyrgyzstan, who also fail to address the everyday problems of local communities (Kirmse 2013: 212). There was no flourishing donor-led society in Kazakhstan comparable to the NGOs in Kyrgyzstan. Still, Toastmasters members and Bolashaq graduates created a social space where Western ideas could spread in Kazakhstan, albeit in rather apolitical areas. During their discussions, the actual roots of problems were not touched upon. Their concern was dealing with and finding the best

methods to solve them after the fact. One again, the underlying ideology was one about taking responsibility to find solutions to problems by relying on one's skills and efforts. The Astana Toastmasters members learned how to achieve their goals through discussion of such titles as Stories of Thinkers, Dreamers and Doers, where they learned that thinking and dreaming was not enough, one had to take actions. Asyl was certainly influenced by such ideas about efficiency and taking action to change one's life. There were parallels with the distributors of *setevoi marketing*; they too were attempting to turn their visions and dreams into attainable goals.

I could observe that the Bolashaq returnees I met at Toastmasters were critical of some developments in Kazakhstan, but they remained rather reserved and limited themselves to making occasional jokes or sarcastic remarks regarding the regime or political developments. One Toastmasters member remarked that, in Astana, it was "about talking big and building big," meaning that the state cared only about image-making in its efforts to transform Astana. Samatbek, the founder of Toastmasters, said, "I watch Habar when I want to become more optimistic and need some entertainment. There is no independent media in Kazakhstan."[28] Thus, the members of the Astana Toastmasters were aware of the regime's limitations, like the lack of independent media; however, they were not in any way involved in changing that situation.

The graduates of the Bolashaq program had a sophisticated attitude towards the government that had sponsored them, but also demanded returns. They, too, identified with the state, although they expected more efficiency and professionalism from their coworkers than they experienced. Some members of the Toastmasters Club observed that the media was biased, promoting a certain agenda everywhere, and that Kazakhstan was no exception in this sense. A young woman who had recently returned after finishing her MA studies in London, was skeptical towards opposition-oriented newspapers in Kazakhstan, such as Svoboda Slova,

[28] *Habar* is the official news channel watched by almost everyone.

saying, the reporting was too emotional and thus unprofessional. “It should be like the BBC’s HARD talk. Just meaningful questions and answers with facts,” she commented. She thought that opposition-minded individuals would not bring radical changes to the country, if elected. She was skeptical of quick solutions. Such attitudes made Bolashaq graduates complicit with the current regime in supporting the status quo. They enjoyed the respect of their families and communities and endorsement as the country’s future elite. Sharing the vision of the president, they mostly focused on their own careers and had individualized goals. They were cosmopolitan and international in their views. The contradictions in being part of a special group highlighted the intricacies of dealing with their new status as civil servants in Astana. However, the government expected them to focus only on the technical aspects of reforms, without questioning the status quo or political order.

To summarize, the members of the Toastmasters in Astana created their own microcosm with its own distinct culture and language, where members tried to be similar to each other. They enjoyed each other’s company; it was a socializing club, too. They organized fun events together like picnics and sports events. In many respects, the Toastmasters club was similar to the community of *setevoi marketing*, in which Ivan cultivated a certain identity for himself with his ‘business partners.’ Ivan and Asyl were both remolding themselves into successful young people, each using the resources and skills available to them. As opposed to recruits to *setevoi marketing*, the Toastmasters members had real international educations, friends, and networks, spoke several foreign languages, and strove to work for successful companies. They cultivated a professional work environment to enhance their skills, be it in management, finances or banking. After gaining experience in state structures, many wanted to switch to the private sector. They were caught in a quest of self-perfection in mastering skills. Hence, Bolashaq graduates were in a search of a way to integrate themselves in Astana through the Toastmasters. They belonged to an exclusive, elitist club, which appreciated achievement and hard work on the sunny side of life.

Achieving Independence for the First Time

Raima, mentioned above, was a newcomer who also wanted to be successful in Astana. Initially, she had high hopes and aspirations. Raima's case was more mundane than the extravagant cases of Ivan in *setevoi marketing*, or elitist Toastmasters like Asyl. Arriving in Astana three years before I met her, Raima experienced a great deal hardship. After graduating from the journalism department at a university in her hometown, Raima came to Astana to try her luck in Astana's media world. With a typical Kazakhstan education, she wanted to get a decent job according to her specialized areas of study. After her efforts to find a job were unsuccessful, she started doing a series of unpaid internships at few of Astana's newspapers. One of her friends was already in Astana and Raima could stay with her. Still, Raima had no money and was living on money borrowed from her friend. After being asked to leave yet another unpaid internship, Raima grew desperate. With no money to return home and no money to buy warm clothes for the approaching winter, she did not know what to do. Luckily, one of her former internship supervisors passed on a hint about a job opening as a video administrator at one of Kazakhstan's main news channels. Raima got the job because there were not many applicants who applied for the job. Only a few people knew about the opening and the hours were arduous; every other day, Raima had to work until midnight. It was not her dream job nor in her area of expertise but she was still happy to have a job after a long period of unemployment. Raima read a lot in her free time and was intelligent, but she was suspicious of people who were nice and friendly, since she thought they were not just 'nice,' but wanted something in return.

Despite her initial hardships and negative experiences in Astana, Raima worked hard to find a way to establish her life anew. Raima managed to find a job with a stable salary in Astana. She lived with five roommates in an old, shared three-room Khrushchevka apartment in the old part of town. Her salary was enough to cover her expenses. She could not afford to rent better housing, but she could afford to go out to bars and restaurants from time to time

with friends. Reflecting on her life in Astana, Raima said, "Here in Astana, you are on your own. I have such a feeling sometimes that no one cares about you or what you do, really. You come here and you must organize your life and no one will hinder you. Nor will anyone help you."

Not anticipating the full extent of the hardships she would face upon her arrival, she learned to solve her problems alone. It was a valuable experience about independence and confirmed Astana's emerging self-reliant subjectivity. Clearly, Raima's previous expectations did not fully materialize, but she claimed that her "initial hopes and dreams were replaced by new ones," perhaps more realistic ones this time. She was not naïve anymore and said that, when a person is in a new environment his or her desires change accordingly because he or she needs to adapt to new circumstances. Raima recalled that she had wanted to try something new and to test her skills three years prior, when she first arrived in Astana. Her skills and knowledge, however, were not enough. One needed friends or connections, or sometimes one needed a bit of luck, too, to succeed in Astana. Her goals were radically different back then, but Raima claimed that it was she who in the end had achieved what she had. She concluded, "Salaries are higher here, of course. And I think in Astana I was able for the first time in my life to be fully independent and take care of myself. And in addition to that, I could help out my parents moneywise a bit, like many others do here. So I gained real independence from my parents here."

Raima experienced personal growth and valued her experience. Coming from the northern part of Kazakhstan, she spoke only Russian. She dated a Russian man in his late thirties who was divorced and a newcomer himself from the north. Raima could enjoy newfound freedom without control or pressure from her parents. Through her job, Raima made new friends, who came from the southern parts of Kazakhstan. They spoke mostly Kazakh and they had their own manners and ways of doing things, as described in Chapter 2. Raima found these differences amusing, as she had never been to the south of the country. In

this way, she learned about such differences. Sometimes, help came from total strangers, rather than relatives or friends. Raima was enthusiastic about her future prospects and wanted to see what was in store. The growth of the capital and the commitment to make Astana outstanding made Raima hopeful about the future:

> So many buildings are being built in Astana and the master plan is not stopping at any point. As soon as they finish one construction project, the next one is on the way. In such a spirit, in other words, Astana sets itself goals, and after achieving those, even bigger aims are set. That's how it is. When you see these buildings on TV or hear [about them] from others, it is not the same as actually coming and seeing them with your own eyes. You approach these buildings and realize how enormous they are and that actually they are in your country and created in such a short time! It impresses you!

For the time being, Raima was happy to witness the changes in the capital and to be able to afford to live there without support from parents or relatives. For her, it was a real accomplishment. Many young people like Raima found jobs, even if those were not what they had hoped for or desired. As a local professor, a veterinarian, commented with regard to his students when I asked about employment opportunities for them in Astana:

> There is an oversupply of people here. They all think that there is enough work for everybody and that you can easily find a job. I think, that is a bit of misinformation. The capital cannot yet provide everyone with jobs. For example, tomorrow when my students graduate, unfortunately, they will face this situation. There are specialists who are needed, but not in Astana. As I said, once the youth gets used to city life, they try their best not to go back to the countryside again. They all try to stay here by all means possible. My students try to take additional training or courses in order to stay in Astana after their graduation. So they do not work in their area of expertise. Very few do so, unfortunately.

Many students tried to change their area of expertise and, until 2008, the construction sector and everything connected to it, was highly profitable and employed many people. Those who could not find a proper job right away took temporary jobs, for which they were overqualified, for example, in the service sector. Raima was also overqualified for her job, but even this job took her time to find in Astana.

"We Work for the State" and the Academy of Public Administration

Dilnaz, my roommate, introduced in previous chapters, was a native of Tselinograd who did not feel 'lost' in the drastic transformation of her city, but on the contrary, had successfully appropriated the status of a government worker, even though she did not work directly for the government. I was able to observe Dilnaz closely since I lived with her for a period of three months. Once, Dilnaz saw me reading Svoboda Slova, an opposition newspaper, which sharply criticised corruption that involved primarily state officials. I asked Dilnaz if she read the newspaper. She said, "Oh, no! If someone at work sees me reading this paper, can you imagine?! We work for the state, as *gossluzhashie*, we are not allowed to read such newspapers. If they found out at work, it would be bad." There was no official prohibition against reading such newspapers; this was a case of self-censorship. Dilnaz was merely exercising caution and believed what everyone believed as a self-evident truth: that reading such papers or showing interest in them called into question one's loyalty to the state. Dilnaz identified herself as a *gossluzhashiy* although she did not directly work for the government. She saw herself as part of the new community of civil servants. Employees of the court system did not see their work as independent from the state apparatus. As part of the local administrative system, public servants organized favorable outcomes for the regime in presidential elections (International Crisis Group 2013: 7). At the same time, Dilnaz did not think that such self-censorship negatively affected her quality of life; on the contrary, working for the state had many benefits. Dilnaz liked her job as the director of human resources at a local court, "Judges consider themselves elite here. Even my position is an elite position!" she said proudly.

A friend of Dilnaz, a young man in his late twenties, worked for the Ministry of Education from nine in the morning until nine at night for a very modest salary. I asked Dilnaz why he did so. "He is doing it for career prospects and networks," remarked Dilnaz. It was an investment in his future. Many young, ambitious people desired jobs in the

government. Having a state jobs meant a acquiring a network of useful social contacts, which was indeed very practical in Kazakhstan's context. Almost all my interlocutors mentioned the importance of connections to receive desired jobs and services. The government sector also attracted people with stability, in contrast to the volatility of the private market, which Alima, for instance, experienced in the banking sector. In addition, the image of civil servants as a status symbol was gaining prestige and importance in Kazakhstan. It was indeed quite difficult to obtain even low-level positions in state structures, despite the low salaries. Dilnaz considered herself a low-ranking public servant, but could exercise some power, too. She enjoyed a stable salary above the average, for the time being enough to cover her expenses as a single woman. She received regular calls from her colleagues asking for favors, to hire their friends or relatives and even to take them on as interns who would work for free. She also made use of her contacts when needed; for instance, Dilnaz found ways to qualify for the state housing program and was on a waiting list to receive a one-room apartment as a young public servant. Her social capital as a member of the state structure was directly used to attain economic resources.

Dilnaz enjoyed belonging to a special privileged group and seemed to see herself as a member of some secret society closed off to most Kazakhstani citizens. There was a certain aura of mystery and importance associated with government workers and their work. Ordinary citizens heard rumors and stories about the lives of high rannking civil servants; and yet no one really knew how they actually lived. Their lives were effectively sealed off from the public. As Alima observed, "I would like to be a fly and go through the keyhole to see how our government workers live in Astana. For sure, they live like kings with no restrictions." Her keyhole metaphor describes well the fact that high-ranking state officials tried to conceal their presence in public places, for example, in VIP rooms. Many new restaurants and bars in Astana had a VIP cabin or section, which was hidden with curtains or behind closed doors. One of my elderly female informants happened to work in a bar that served 'important

people' exclusively. She told me the employees were warned not to take any pictures or spread any rumors about who visited the place. This was perhaps because some well-known politicians came with their mistresses or other people with whom they did not wish to be seen in public. Therefore, the hiring process for waiters was very strict and the ability to keep secrets was a main requirement. It should be mentioned that mostly high leve government officials frequented such places.

The commonly shared negative stereotype of the elite and government workers was that they were corrupt and did not care much about ordinary people; at the same time, most people envied their carefree lifestyles and material wealth. The yellow press would print rumors about the mistresses of high-ranking state officials and their personal fortunetellers who protected them from the evil eye. This was probably as much as ordinary people knew about the everyday lives of their civil servants. The government wanted to change the negative image of chinovniki as self-enriching and having no responsibility for the well-being of ordinary citizens. The new image of the new government workers was to portray them as competent, patriotic, loyal citizens, who worked to contribute to the development of the country. They were given a special assignment to improve the performance of the state apparatus and contribute to the modernization of the country, as envisioned by the government and especially by President Nazarbayev. This was illustrated by Asyl and her friends. Still, changing the image of government workers was hard to achieve, since the 'old' ways of corruption and not working were still widespread.

In order to change the negative image of government workers, several anti-corruption agencies were established. Astana had a higher proportion of police than in other cities, including financial police and the famous KNB [Komitet National'noy Bezopasnosti or National Security Committee, the secret police]. Because of this, working for the state entailed high risks. Dilnaz did not want to attract the attention of KNB people, who sought for anything suspicious to start an enquiry against government workers. In addition, Dilnaz was

especially afraid of the financial police because there were many scandals involving judges caught in corruption acts. Dilnaz sometimes panicked; afraid she might be caught or involved in some shady deal which would jeopardize her position. Moreover, she was sure that it was usually low-ranking state officials who were under scrutiny and these were most afraid to lose their precious jobs. High-profile top officials in Kazakhstan seemed to enjoy more security than lower-ranking civil servants, as they were almost never involved in corruption charges, as reports confirm (International Crisis Group 2013). There were a few exceptions, certainly. In addition, Dilnaz was convinced that her phones were tapped. I learned from Dilnaz about a recent case, where KNB caught a local judge receiving a bribe. "It can be a setup," said Dilnaz, referring to how the KNB people came exactly at the moment when the bribe was being handed over. "This poor judge worked thirty-five years and now, at the age of 57, finds herself under investigation by the financial police," said Dilnaz, feeling sorry for her. Apparently, the judge hanged herself in the middle of the investigation, according to Dilnaz. I did not hear about this case from the media, so I was not sure if it really happened; it could happen that sometimes sensitive and controversial news was not covered at all. Dilnaz knew about the case because of her work connections. In any case, the KNB was examining the judiciary system very carefully. Dilnaz mentioned that many of her acquaintances in Astana worked for the financial police, KNB, or the presidential guard. She was fearful of them, but also thought they were useful contacts. As she assured me, "They know everything. They work effectively." Perhaps it was her strategy to protect herself by remaining informed of possible risks. Dilnaz's job seemed fairly stable, if she was careful; still, it seemed that nobody could be totally secure in such circumstances.

Other civil servants were afraid of the financial police, too. A friend of Dilnaz, who worked as a secretary at a ministerial agency for innovation, complained that her colleagues wrote anonymous letters to the KNB or the financial police, informing on each other. As a result, ironically, often the hardest working people were pushed out and replaced. The

financial police were constantly investigating agencies for corruption because they frequently received complaint letters from 'insiders.' Thus, the competent former director of the innovation agency, who was ethnically half German and half Russian, was arrested on corruption charges and replaced with a Kazakh newcomer from the south. Sometimes colleagues wanted to get rid of competitors, it seemed, by informing on them to the KNB in order to start an investigation. The investigations seemed random and some suspected the involvement of these very anti-corruption structures in corrupt deals. Hence, efforts to fight corruption in state structures were only partially successful and sometimes even counter-effective. Most lower- and middle-ranking civil servants were very afraid of losing their positions. At the end, the benefits, as well as the risks, were all part of working for the state: the risks controversially contributed to the importance and prestige of working for the state, as well.

Dilnaz proudly asserted that she had managed to build her career starting from the lowest level and slowly working her way up to become the chief of staff at the court. Coming from a modest social background, Dilnaz made good use of her limited resources and benefited from Astana becoming the capital. Dilnaz's father passed away when she was a child and her mother raised her and her sister alone. Her father's relatives did not help her mother. The mother later found a new partner and lived with him in a rented apartment. Thus, Dilnaz's family background was far from the conventional 'good Kazakh family.' Early on, Dilnaz learned to be independent and to rely on herself. She was proud that her father's relatives, who had ignored her mother in the past, now asked Dilnaz for help. Dilnaz gained their respect by doing them small favors she could easily arrange through her position at the court. She arrogantly said, "My father's relatives are supposed to be the closest but I am ashamed of these relatives. They are simple people; none of them has a high position or a status like me." But Dilnaz also felt that her relatives exploited her. These relatives often asked her help, but did not pay anything or give back, so that Dilnaz had to pay herself for

these arrangements. Nevertheless, Dilnaz was proud of her achievements and did not shy from calling attention to this whenever she had the chance. She hoped to achieve even more than just her position at the local court. With the help of her work contacts, she was rather a successful civil servant, but she wanted to upgrade her professional status to the next level. Her goal was to work at the Supreme Court.

Working her way up to work at the Supreme Court, Dilnaz was told she needed to pay a huge bribe to get any position there. Having passed the exams to become a judge, she was on the waiting list to be appointed as one, but she also had to know the 'right' people in addition to paying the bribe. Dilnaz still hoped one day to become a judge and, for that, she had to develop the right skills. A few weeks after I had moved to our shared apartment, Dilnaz told me about her decision to apply to the Academy of Public Administration Under the President [Akademia Upravleniia pri Prezidente], where they offered a Master's degree for promising young people aspiring to hold government positions. Dilnaz personally knew other young people, among them young judges or prosecutors, who had studied there. The stories of these students travelling abroad for one or two semesters during their studies as part of the exchange program inspired her. The career prospects after graduating from the academy included a promising future. By entering the academy, Dilnaz wanted to invest strategically in her education.

The entrance exams for the academy required good English, in addition to excellent university grades. Dilnaz could understand some English, but could hardly speak. She then hastily signed up for expensive, private English lessons to prepare for the entrance exams. After work, Dilnaz attended her English class and used to come home around ten o'clock at night. Still, there was not enough time to make her English fluent, since the exams were supposed to take place in a month. Dilnaz then asked for my help with English. First, I assumed she wanted me to help her prepare for the exams, but then she boldly told me her plan, which involved me taking the English test on the day of the examination, instead of her.

According to her, I would dress up like her and take her ID, Dilnaz hoped that the examiners would not see the difference or would ignore it, if she bribed them. When I refused, she said, "Come on, everyone does it." Luckily, I arranged to leave Astana during her exams and thus escaped her plan. This was her second attempt to gain admittance to the academy; the first attempt ended unsuccessfully in 2008. Dilnaz said her current boss at work sat on the examination commission and failed her on purpose because she did not want to lose Dilnaz, since she was a valuable worker. This time, however, her supervisor had allegedly agreed to assist Dilnaz in passing the exams.

When I was back to Astana, we celebrated Dilnaz's successful entrance examinations with a bottle of wine. First, I was surprised that she managed on her own, but then she told how it happened. It turned out Dilnaz copied the correct answers from her neighbor during the English exam and received over ninety points out of 100, thus successfully passing the test. She later paid the neighbor for her help during the exam. Dilnaz was very proud that she managed to pass the test. Through her contacts, Dilnaz had also negotiated passing the additional oral examinations, since, as arranged, the examiners did not ask difficult questions. Dilnaz claimed that her friend had paid about $10,000 to pass the same exams, but failed at the end because she apparently could not even answer simple questions during the oral part. Thus, even with bribing, there was no guarantee that things would work out. There were also cases, Dilnaz told me, of students who were bright and relied only on their knowledge, but failed all the same. Hence, to secure success Dilnaz combined both: some knowledge, bribing, and networks. She remarked, "Without bribing, you get nothing. Corruption starts even in kindergarten. You need to pay to place your kid there. If you go to the hospital, to be properly taken care of you need to pay." I did not ask Dilnaz if she considered it morally justifiable that she got into the academy because she could give bribes, while those who could not were not accepted. However, as will be shown later, Dilnaz seemed to justify these methods for

achieving her goal of becoming a judge by stating that then she could decide not to take bribes.

After being accepted to the academy, Dilnaz felt she belonged to even more special category of people and already started to think about where she would like to travel for her semester abroad. In addition, she started choosing new clothes, as well as new friends, because she was afraid that some of her old contacts might not fit her new position. Dilnaz wanted to find a new boyfriend, who also studied at the academy. Soon enough she moved out of our apartment, although still keeping her role as a manager, since she collected the rent from us. Her rationale for moving out was that she had heard about a brand-new dormitory being built for the students of the academy in the new part of the city, which would be free for them. However, she was later disappointed to find out that it was located far from the city center and not free at all. In fact, she would have to pay twice as much as she paid for her old accommodation. Dilnaz then temporarily moved into her mother's place. Her efforts were aimed at being included as one of the 'new' type of government workers.

Many young people like Dilnaz, who had not been abroad or did not yet speak English, were inspired to pursue careers in the state apparatus, nonetheless. Before they could achieve advancement, many carried out the bulk of administrative jobs, staying late at work and hoping to get promoted or to become qualified for a state subsidized apartment. I heard many stories of low-level state workers, who were regularly asked to stay overtime without being compensated or rewarded. Those who complained were replaced or reminded that hundreds of equally qualified people would gladly take their positions. The increasingly positive image of civil servants and prospects for career advancement, as well as just living in Astana, were good reasons to stay in state structures, despite the low salaries. Those who were relocated from Almaty or elsewhere, although not enthusiastic at first, had come to see Astana as their new home, and most importantly, the place where their job, colleagues, and new

friends were. Many started families in their new, subsidized apartments. As an administrative center, Astana was quietly transforming from a city of chinovniki into a city of *gossluzhashie*.

Thus in Astana government employees belonged to a privileged group who cultivated and exploited their 'special status' to benefit from the new capital. Many government workers automatically supported the current regime and felt protected by it; self-censorship was common among government workers. Dilnaz, coming from a modest family background, was able to successfully mobilize her resources to achieve her goal. At the age of twenty-seven, she did not think it was too late to study further and she did not want to get married right away. The image of the 'elite city' made alternative paths, such as the pursuit of a career in the government desirable, not only for young men, but also for young, single women, like Dilnaz. Most importantly, the experience of working for the state in the futuristic capital provided a particular environment in which state officials were promoted to upper-class citizens with special privileges and high status.

Astana's Birthday Celebration

It was not surprising that Dilnaz wanted to study at the academy and further increase her chances of having a successful career in the government sector. The government generously rewarded some public sector and government employees during national holidays. These benefits were most visible during the national celebrations. Law enforcement employees, judges, prosecutors, and the like, with whom Dilnaz interacted on a daily basis, could receive extra money as bonuses, which they greatly appreciated. During the Astana Day celebrations, which took place every year to commemorate the capital's move, Dilnaz and I went out to celebrate every day for three days in a row. Between July 4 and July 6, we went to see a free ballet performance and fireworks on the river bank and then went to see a concert in the old square with local stars. In addition, we met some of Dilnaz's friends, who worked for the government, and went dancing with them. During these celebrations, it became clear that

even the low-ranking officials like Dilnaz enjoyed benefits and access to events which were not available to ordinary citizens.

Astana Day was moved to July 6 in 2006 to coincide with President Nazarbayev's birthday. Several famous Russian singers were invited to give special concerts. There was even a famous Italian opera singer, who sang at the ceremony dedicated to the opening of the Khan Shatyry shopping mall, to which the leaders of neighboring states were also invited. In addition, there were the openings of Nazarbayev University and of the Russian Business Center and other smaller events organized on this day. The official celebration lasted three days, prior to Astana Day proper. The streets were full of people. Everyone was dressed nicely and in a good mood. Just a week before the president's birthday, there was a festival of action movies. The state spent millions of dollars and paid huge attention to Astana Day; the costs exceed any amount spent on other holidays (Koch 2012: 177). The celebrations of Astana Day lasted a few days with exclusive, as well as mass, events. The whole city was mobilized.

For Astana Day, Dilnaz received about $200 bonus payment [premial'noe] as many other government workers did. Similar types of extra payments existed during the Soviet period as well, albeit for different social groups. All of Dilnaz's coworkers received these extra payments a few days prior to Astana Day, but her director received twice as much as the others. Civil servants received such bonuses, Dilnaz explained to me, and added that it was because the government wanted people to have money to spend during Astana Day celebration and to create a positive celebratory mood. Many concerts and events were already booked in advance by special invitation for state officials only. Since tickets were expensive for such events it was good to get these extra payments to buy tickets, remarked Dilnaz. She bought a new dress for about $100 from this extra payment and the rest she saved. Dilnaz was especially happy that she lived in the capital and as a civil servant could get extra money for this occasion. Those working outside the government sector received no such bonuses.

Dilnaz had plans to go to concerts and bars with her friends for the next three days. In contrast to her, her roommates had no such exciting plans. As Alima said, "For ordinary people like me, it starts with eating ice cream in the Old Square, then taking a walk in the park. That's all." It was true that Dilnaz had more friends than Alima, who could pay her way from time to time, but Dilnaz could also pay for herself. Likewise, Dilnaz invited me to join her because we became like friends sharing one room and also because I could pay for myself. Other free events included nomad festivals, open air concerts, and fireworks that everyone could attend. However, because these events were free, attending them was not prestigious. They were meant for the masses, meaning for the *priezzhie*, newcomers, especially from the villages. So Alima avoided attending them. As Laszczkowski also demonstrates, these outdoor public events are avoided by many locals because of all the newcomers (2012: 168). *Priezzhie* dominated public space, literally taking over the city.

On July 5th, during the day we went to the opening of Khan Shatyr shopping mall, which was designed by the famous architect Norman Foster. The mall had tent-shaped architecture with a special lining to protect visitors from the cold winters. In addition, it had an artificial beach on the roof, allegedly with sand brought from the Maldives. The tent was meant to create a special microclimate in the shopping mall, I heard. The rumors surrounding this place made it sound a fantasy world; some claimed that it would be a ski slope in summer and a beach in winter. There was no ski slope, only a beach. Still it was something extraordinary for many. On the opening day, there were many police and all the roads were blocked. Dilnaz and I were not allowed to attend the opening of Khan Shatyr without a special invitation, so we went to the riverside to watch free concerts and later in the evening to enjoy the fireworks. Usually, she avoided such places but since our plan to visit the opening of Khan Shatyr was unsuccessful, we went to the concert instead.

The next day, Dilnaz and I prepared to go out with some of her friends. While Dilnaz was getting dressed, I asked her what she thought about the lavish celebrations of Astana Day.

She said, “These concerts are organized not for Astana, but because it is Nazarbayev’s birthday!” She agreed that many *priezzhie* could not afford to spend money to go to concerts in Astana. She then talked about how her court dealt with juvenile delinquency. The court had to process many cases of newcomers from the nearby villages, who were trying to earn extra money in Astana. The parents were preoccupied with their work in the trade and service sectors and their children often got involved in petty crimes like theft. The parents then came to the court, but usually could not offer money to pay the fine or bribe the judges. Dilnaz said, “These families are poor, but the kids want to dress well and have money, so they go and steal. And their mothers might earn as little as 15,000 Tenge ($100) as cleaners. Of course, it is not enough for Astana!” In contrast, the children of the rich who committed petty crimes paid fines or gave bribes before their cases even reached the courts. “Do you think those rich kids don’t break the law? They act ‘cool’ and behave as if everything were allowed. They just bribe and close the deal before it is even registered,” stated Dilnaz, somewhat outraged. She was very well cognizant of the injustice of the court system and the increasing social gap between poor and rich. Dilnaz continued, “All these problems have deep socioeconomic roots and Kazakhstan is not that rich. If you go to the villages and see how people live there, you will be shocked. There are no jobs. People cannot afford anything.” In her dream to become a judge, she claimed she would not take bribes because her salary would be high enough and she was not greedy like the others. With that, Dilnaz was ready in her beautiful new dress and makeup, and soon we were ready for our evening celebration of Astana Day.

We were supposed to meet two male acquaintances of Dilnaz at the riverbank promenade on the Ishim River. One was a Bolashaq graduate and worked for the Ministry of Education for twelve hours a day for a modest salary. But he did not want to talk about his job and only mentioned that he worked on the weekends, too. He was happy to have a few days off because of the Astana Day celebrations. In the meantime, it would soon to be midnight and we all watched the fireworks go off over the Ishim River. Many people cheered since they

especially came to see the fireworks and had been waiting impatiently for hours. Then we all went to a small bar to have a drink. While we were in the bar, Dilnaz from time to time thought that someone was observing or following her. Perhaps she was just suspicious, similar to her conviction that her mobile phones were bugged. No one approached Dilnaz or behaved suspiciously. After drinking and dancing until four o'clock in the morning, Dilnaz and I took a taxi home. Dilnaz's friends stayed in the bar and continued drinking.

For the next day, Dilnaz had gotten us tickets to a concert by Russian pop band Ne-Yo. It was the third and last day of the celebrations. In addition, Sergey Lazarev, the young Russian pop singer, performed with an impressive laser show at the concert. A few local Kazakh artists performed as well. The concert took place in the newly finished stadium on the Left Bank. Dilnaz was not able to obtain tickets to expensive concerts like some other officials, but at least she managed to buy cheap tickets for this concert. The stadium was quite full with mostly young people in their twenties who were too excited to sit, so they shouted and danced on their seats. After the concert, Dilnaz and I lost each other and had to find our ways home alone. The streets were full of cars and the police tried to control traffic. This was how Dilnaz and I celebrated Astana Day. In contrast, my other roommates mostly stayed at home or at most went to the parade in the old town. As stated above, during these events, government workers could feel especially privileged in comparison to ordinary people, who had to be satisfied with free mass events like fireworks and the parade.

Powerless Opposition and Legitimization of the Regime

In this section, the cracks in utopian Astana become visible. Critical voices are heard and the image breaks apart, unsupported by anything other than the representation of success. The salvation which the Astana discourse offered to all current social, economic, and political problems became increasingly vague and doubtful. Disenchantment and disillusionment could eventually lead to major criticism of the prestige project, which Astana represented, backed by the logic of neoliberalism. Nonetheless, negative attitudes, frustration, and, most of all,

direct outrage in the forms of questioning and opposition all remained limited. The authorities were questioned only so far as doing so did not disturb the order of things, the political system, and societal relations. On the contrary, fears, anxiety, and uncertainty all became intertwined with the desires, hopes, and promises Astana offered. The interplay of conflicting and, at times, incompatible sensibilities are explored in this section. How people cope with uncertainty is a fundamental challenge, which liminality explores, and I attempt to shed light on this.

On the eve of the celebration of Astana Day, the Kazakhstani media boasted that spending on education had increased eight times what it had been ten years earlier. President Nazarbayev's speech, in which he claimed that Kazakhstanis would be one of the most educated, enlightened, and competitive peoples in the world, was reproduced in the media. This coincided with the opening of Nazarbayev University in Astana, which was the latest highlight of 2010. This university was to be one of a kind, a new elite university in Central Asia. The best students from all over the country were invited to take the entrance exams, and if passed, they would recceive a stipend and study for free under the guidance of selected Western scholars, who for the most part specialized in natural sciences. Employing professors from world-renowned universities, Nazarbayev University was to train future civil servants and the country's elite. Expectations were high because the president expected no less than major breakthroughs and contributions, for instance, in medicine or biotechnology, in the near future. In short, Nazarbayev University was to become an Oxford or Harvard of Central Asia (Myers 2006). It was a showcase meant to demonstrate the achievements of Kazakhstan and Astana, in particular, and a tribute to Nazarbayev himself. On its website, Nazarbayev University declares that one of its principles is love of the homeland and serving it to help to become a modern, prosperous nation.

Amid these positive portrayals of progress and praise for Nazarbayev University, some public figures were not so enthusiastic. The main editor of Svoboda Slova, Guljan Ergalieva,

was known for her sharp criticism of the regime. In connection to the opening of Nazarbayev University, she claimed that the numbers of universities in Kazakhstan had increased, while their quality was decreasing. Ergalieva argued, "We don't need to open more universities with $20,000 tuition fees; we need to tackle the drug issue in schools instead" (Svoboda Slova 2010). She wrote that each year graduating students could not find jobs and it made more sense to invest in opening factories and providing jobs for these graduates.

My roommates, who had little connection to elite universities, were critical of Nazarbayev University too. When I mentioned that I had met some of the new faculty from the Imperial College London, who came to teach students English at Nazarbayev University, the reaction of my roommate Alima was negative. "Why do we need them to teach our students English? We live in Kazakhstan, why do we need English? It is nonsense! They will graduate and leave Kazakhstan anyway. What's the point?" Nursuluu, the youngest of my roommates, a 21-year-old medical student, also protested, "Why can't the government give us a decent building! The other day, we had to have our classes in the basement where it was freezing cold and we had no lights. And this is the medical academy in the capital!" My roommates regarded it unfair that the government wanted to spend even more money on educating the children of the elite. Alima further complained, "Why do we need Nazarbayev University? We are not any better than Turkmenbashi! Yes, we now have an Elbasi, 'leader of the nation.' People will make fun of us! This is cult of personality. Now all that is left for us to do is to pray to Nazarbayev." The voices of my roommates resonated with the opinions of the editor of Svoboda Slova, who thought the graduates of Nazarbayev University would belong to a privileged class, isolated from the rest of the citizens. My roommates questioned Nazarbayev University's contribution to the well-being of the country, and found ludicrous expectations of a major 'breakthrough.'

One evening, we were watching the news on the national TV station and there was a report that in the oil-rich region of Masgystau, two people had died in a hospital because the

nurses did not look after them. In one case, the nurse demanded money openly, but the patient did not have any for bribe. The parents of the patient wanted to sue the nurse. Medical staff, especially nurses, earned very little and expected extra payments from patients. After watching this, Nursuluu commented that conditions in the hospitals in the old part of Astana were terrible. She told us how, during her internship in emergency service, they could not find a place for a pregnant woman in any hospital in Astana. The hospitals were full, and due to a lack of beds, some patients were placed in hallways. Doctors and nurses paid more attention to those who gave bribes. For Nursuluu, it was the everyday reality of the healthcare sector, which she had experienced. This was no secret. Many knew about the conditions in hospitals and the lack of qualified doctors. The money spent on modernizing the social infrastructure was not equally distributed, since the newly built hospitals on the Left Bank received more money than the old ones. These new projects consumed large chunks of the state budget. Services at the new hospitals were expensive; modern medical equipment was imported from abroad, but patients had to pay a lot for services.

Such critical remarks about Nazarbayev University or the state of hospitals were only made in private and they were not directed against the regime as such. For most people, it made little difference anyway, as Marzhan, a young woman, who worked in the media, said: "Svoboda Slova is like a mosquito bite; it does not influence anything that goes on in this country." Most media and newspapers were pro-government, leaving little legitimate space for alternative or critical discussions. The general public viewed such opposition newspapers as highly cynical and their journalists as envious of country's elite, who had acquired enormous of wealth. Kanysh, my divorced roommate, once saw me reading Svoboda Slova and remarked that, "They make money on black PR," meaning the newspaper specialized in negative publicity for the country. She even suggested that these papers received money to create an image of freedom of the press, but actually could not influence anything in the country. She further claimed, "I used to read all these newspapers, but then I thought, why the

hell I need to stuff my head with all this crap? It brings me nothing. I just start to worry about things." Kanysh preferred to read gossip newspapers that published stories about government workers and discussed what presents they gave to their mistresses. She commented, "In the past, the mistresses of our rich men got only apartments and expensive jewelry, and now they own shares in oil companies! I want that too."

As for Asyl and Dilnaz, who identified themselves with the government, critical remarks of the regime were expressed from the point of view of 'insiders,' who dealt with the state structures every day and could afford to be sarcastic, while not being against the regime. Their point was the position of the privileged. The new elite, like the graduates of the Bolashaq program, certainly did not fit the image of a typical *chinovnik,* as represented in Svoboda Slova's fictional anecdotes. These anecdotes portrayed an overweight male in his fifties, who ate big chunks of meat for breakfast in the morning, as well as for dinner at night; he drove an expensive car and all of his friends drove exactly the same model. He and his friends were all superficial and cared only about enriching themselves. This might have found resonance with ordinary people, who felt alienated from prosperity, like Alima, but not with progressive youth, like Asyl and Dilnaz. This exaggerated cynical, mocking representation was one-sided and created a hostile image of all government workers, to which neither Dilnaz nor any Bolashaq returnee like Asyl could relate. Such descriptions alienated and even scared many government workers, who felt unappreciated for their hard work and unfairly judged as immoral and corrupt. Some felt offended by newspapers that just wanted to slander everything the state achieved or did for the sake of the country. Many low-level government workers and public servants worked long hours for little pay and appreciation. Therefore, they could hardly identify with opposition-minded critics, like the editor of Svoboda Slova.

Politics was not interesting to many of my informants, who said they did not wish to talk about and could really comment on my question about political participation. Many others were simply baffled by this question and did not understand what I wanted to know,

when I asked how they participated in the political process. Mostly, they claimed they were not competent enough to judge. The same Alima, who mentioned Nazarbayev's cult of personality, claimed:

> I am far from politics. I don't want to get involved in politics. The only thing I care about is that we have stable salaries, that there is no war and that everyone lives in peace with each other. That's the most important thing. I am telling you, I don't know about politics. Maybe there are some issues if one digs deeper, but right now I can't think of anything to criticize.

When I asked how living in the capital affects her life and if she felt closer to political life here, her reaction was:

> To political life here? No. How can I? I have nothing to do with it. The only thing is when there are movie festivals or other events, like the parade, I can go there instead of watching it on television. One can directly participate and feel as part of it. So, yes, in this case, I feel like I am living in the capital. Life is busy here. Political life? I don't know. How would I take part? No, I have no government position to influence politics.

Mobilization of agency happened through participation in parades, in which residents felt included. As Alima commented, "Well, I don't know if it was a good or a bad decision to move the capital here, but what they have done is impressive anyway." Bissenova's informants also expressed their disinterest in politics and many openly stated that they hoped things would stay as they are for as long as possible (2012). However, one has to mention that those people who protest and go against the regime receive severe punishment. This was the case with protests by oil workers in Zhanaozen in 2011, which left at least fifteen people dead. The danger was real and could lead to tragic consequences. In this background, for many people the decision to stay out of politics was also a decision based on caution.

Koch argues in her dissertation, Kazakhstani citizens situate themselves as subjects who are "clearly outside of the state apparatus of decision-maker; their language suggests a clear lack of agency with respect to the capital change" (2012: 135). This passiveness goes beyond capital change and touches on citizens' general role in political and economic affairs (ibid.). It allowed elites to gain control over state affairs without being challenged. In this

light, criticizing the opening of Nazarbayev University remained only a complaint about realities of life which a person could not influence or control. As Alima stated, people remained disconnected from political decisions. One could say that *priezzhie* were submissive and had to be modest and only accept the 'rules of the game' for integrating themselves in the "city of the future." In the liminal phase, where neophytes are becoming initiated into the new status or position, submission and total obedience are expected from them (Turner 1969: 364). Alima's modest and accepting attitude reflected her position as a newcomer or 'neophyte,' such that she was not in a position to judge or evaluate the decisions of the ruling elite or the government, in general, even when she was not happy with their performance.

Critical remarks notwithstanding, there was a widespread support for President Nazarbayev's regime because it promised and partly delivered economic growth, stability, and inter-ethnic harmony, while the mass media presented these accomplishments, including the Astana project, as taking place under the wise leadership of the president. For people like Ivan, this promise was embodied in the city's architecture:

> In the future it will be a megacity, of course. It will be something grand with a population of at least two million. It will be a financial, as well as a cultural, center. Today, everything is being done to realize this goal. I think our president will finish what he started. He will reach his goal. I have no doubt about it and I will even be proud to have been part of this great thing! If the government continues to invest in this city, build factories and so on, then there is a future here. Nazarbayev has committed himself fully. He put his heart into the capital to make it the pride of our country, our nation. You see if he did not want our capital to be like this, nothing would change in this city. It is purely his merit. Well, of course the other question is how much money he spent, but that's a different question. Still, I think today every Kazakhstab citizen is proud of his capital, including myself. I like Nursultan Abishevich [the president] as a person and as a leader. Not everyone is capable of realizing something like this just in ten years, to transform the city!

The modernization discourse of the president, which Ivan also enthusiastically supported, was widely affirmed by Kazakhstanis during my research period. The role of the mass media in promoting Astana as Nazarbayev's achievement was crucial. Despite all the skepticism after a decade, the capital had become a 'success story,' a major attraction point, and the pride of Kazakhstan. Moreover, the standard of living increased for many, with a GDP of $ 12,000 in

2011. Personal success and career growth became realistic aspirations (Schmitz and Wolters 2012: 23). As Kazakhstan is blessed with natural resources, oil as a primary export product increased revenues and contributed hugely to the country's economic growth beginning in the early 2000s. American multinational firms have invested billions in Kazakhstan's oil industry (Brauer 2009). The April 2011 presidential elections showed that the president enjoyed broad popular support; the corruption and self-enrichment of the elites did not seem to change popular sentiment. The state promises its citizens a share in the country's economic success, provided they refrain from demands for political participation (Schmitz and Wolters 2012). Nazarbayev successfully applied soft authoritarianism and translated oil wealth into what Schatz (2009: 205) calls agenda-setting power, based on the persuasion that future prosperity depends upon strong leadership and political stability.

Since political involvement was not an option for many, what remained for people like Alima and Ivan was to evaluate the work of the government based on the built environment, and the ability of the head of the state to control the country. In this regard, the state was seen as a successful business corporation, which thanks to its good management, viz., the president, created success for business. Alima's apolitical statements, "I have nothing to do with politics" and "I don't work for the government," as well as Ivan's admiration for strong leadership signaled this kind of evaluation from afar, as if from the position of an outsider. They expected the state to perform without their involvement and hoped to benefit indirectly. The role of Nazarbayev as above and beyond the state was important here. The capital was to flourish and develop under the guidance of the 'master' (the president), who would bring salvation to all. Ivan saw Nazarbayev like a father figure, strong and masculine and in full control of political and social life, which was a good thing for him. He occupied a special position: When ordinary people criticized corruption, they directed their criticism towards the corrupt government workers who were 'greedy' and said that Nazarbayev could not check and control every single subordinate. If he just extended his control more efficiently, then things

would have worked better, many believed. Hence the opposition, the media, and the public were not seen as stakeholders who should be actively engaged in the political process.

In the meantime, Ivan was happy with 'small achievements' in Astana:

> You know, I came here in winter and the best thing was that when I went outside into my front yard there was no snow. Everything was clean! It is a great pleasure when the snow is removed from sidewalks. The opposite is true in Karaganda. I really want to see the same in Karaganda! There is no ice, no snow, and all the pedestrian ways are taken care of. This is cool, really cool! They pay attention to such matters here. Every morning there is no snow in the front yard. Great! And they plant flowers everywhere. They change them and plant new ones constantly!

It was true that Astana received disproportionately more money and care than other cities and residents could clearly see that. People enjoyed better infrastructure, which they thought would slowly spill over to other parts of the country. However, it might take a long time, while in Astana one could enjoy this 'here and now.' As a middle-aged man from Almaty said, "The government is building houses, repairing streets, changing old pipes. I don't know what to complain about. It's all being improved and things will be in order. No need to worry. Everything that is being done is done for the better! We will achieve something at last." In this, the 'progress' in Astana applies to society at large and creates an impression that the whole country, as well as all segments of the population, will benefit (Koch 2012: 153). Another elderly man claimed, "After all, the capital is built for the future of our nation and our children will live here. It is for them." The promised future was even postponed for the next generation, who would enjoy it fully. Furthermore, the futuristic capital was comforting, as Ong argues, "The hyperbuilding becomes part of the anticipation of a future that is asserted as a guarantee" (2011: 211). The buildings were powerful tangible symbols and the direct embodiment of the belief that utopian Astana was not only a promise but had a physical presence. Raima concluded. "You go and look around at these new buildings and you are just happy because it does not matter if the country is experiencing a financial crisis now. We still have all this and it will stay! It is like a guarantee that everything will be fine."

Finally, many informants shied away from discussing the problems they faced in Astana as if they had no right to talk about such trivial matters while the capital carried such importance for the nation and country as a whole. In the light of the brighter future that Astana promised, it was shameful and disrespectful to mention the capital's negative aspects. Gulmira, one of my younger roommates, said:

> At this period of my life, I can say that I am satisfied with how things are going. Work, well, yes, I am unemployed now. But unemployment exists everywhere, not only in Kazakhstan and in Astana. This is normal. Why should I complain? A person needs to be self-sufficient. One should stay positive. I am not living on the streets, I am not hungry. I am fine. There are people who live worse than I do. One should appreciate what one has at the moment, and work to improve one's situation. Thank God, there is peace and stability in our country!

Newcomers like Gulmira justified their hardships by comparing their situation to poorer *priezzhie*. Well-being became relative and responsibility for it lay with the individual, rather than with the state or factors such as the country's political and economic situation. Similarly, Arsen, introduced in Chapter 1, said:

> With this financial crisis, there are staff reductions now. I might even be fired under the optimization process in the bank. Kazakhstan's Railway [Qazaqstan Temir Jolu] fired 20% or 30% of its staff. If in other countries people take to the streets to protest, demanding the removal of this or that person from power, Kazakhs will not go out on the streets. Kazakh people are such people that look for other solutions. I don't know, I haven't seen anything like that here, despite the financial crisis.

He was referring to my native country of Kyrgyzstan and the protests that took place there in 2010. In Kazakhstan media, these events were largely covered as creating chaos and disorder, and no mention was made of citizens demanding more democratic reforms or changes. Other respondents I met, when referring to the same events, told me that it was 'the Americans' who were in control of politics in Kyrgyzstan, and were thus orchestrating the protests and revolutions. This echoed the propaganda coming from Russian state TV channels, which were widely watched in Kazakhstan. Official Kazakhstan media used the instability in Kyrgyzstan to highlight its own stability and the promise of peace. Several informants also explicitly mentioned the importance of peace and the absence of war, as Alima or Gulmira did. In

contrast to neighboring Kyrgyzstan, in Kazakhstan, the political elites had firm control over the state, which was seen as positive by ordinary citizens. Direct confrontation with state power or violence against it was outright rejected.

Thus, the positive evaluation of Nazarbayev and the new capital indeed served to divert attention from a critical examination of Astana's shortcomings. Looking at the bigger picture, the successful portrayal of the capital's achievements secured widespread approval among Kazakhstan citizens. In addition, they could not imagine participating in or influencing politics, as mentioned above. In this way, the legitimized urban order was accomplished, that is, "inculcating and maintaining consensus, securing the consent of those who might resist and excluding those who refuse to consent" (Tonkiss 2005: 76).

Conclusion: The Liminality of Success

Ivan, Asyl, Raima, and Dilnaz were very different, but, at the same time, remarkably similar in their aspirations. They dreamed of successful careers and independence. As Hannerz notes, people use the materials of the city for both the construction and presentation of self (1980: 305) and Astana's newcomers found themselves in the right city in which to experiment and explore new opportunities. Astana's hypercity image, which projected progress, modernity, and development was appropriated by newcomers to imagine a city where personal aspirations, goals, and careers seemed legitimate and desired. Each of them evaluated being successful in Astana in their own way, according to the experiences they created, people they met, and hardships with which they had to deal. For Ivan, *setevoi marketing* was a way to achieve the 'Astana Dream,' while for Asyl it was through Toastmasters and being a Bolashaq graduate, which directly connected her to the state. For Dilnaz, it was through Academy of Public Administration and working for the courts. In the end, these were personality-changing experiences, which shaped them into new subjectivities of neoliberal patriots loyal to the state, who did not question the development discourse of the state or the political order at large.

The newly built environment in Astana was not a passive background, but contributed to the formation of a specific urban environment characterized by speculative activities. The city as such was a material, spatial, and cultural form (Low 1999). Ivan's engagement with the urban built space inculcated in Ivan a belief that 'Astana was a right place for *setevoi marketing*.' With ever more newcomers to Astana looking for their share of luck, like Ivan, there was a market for *setevoi marketing*. Ivan was keen to capitalize on this. Astana's seductive urban space promised success to everyone, regardless of where they started out and many were desperate to believe this. In this sense, Astana's cityscape gave Ivan a chance to try himself as a businessman and make more out of himself than just an electrician or a miner, like his father. In fact, it would have been hard to win new clients for *setevoi marketing* in some distant town or a region of Kazakhstan, where the Soviet architecture was still crumbling with no sign of modernization coming any time soon. But Astana was where the 'miracle' happened. In this sense, it is useful to keep in mind what Edward Soja states about post-metropoles, according to which a city is a "metaphysical reality, a place where the real and the imagined are persistently commingled" (2000: 147). The lived space is "simultaneously real-and-imagined, actual-and-virtual, a locus of structured individual and collective experience and agency" (ibid.: 11). Activities like *setevoi marketing* produced new meanings for urban space, where success was attainable for everyone.

No doubt the collapse of *setevoi marketing* would eventually leave many recruits disillusioned in the future about that 'business model.' But it would not discredit the entire Astana discourse as a city of opportunities. Ivan, who endorsed the image of Astana, must uphold that image by trying to keep up with it. If he failed, his belief in the success of setevoi markeing would likewise fall apart. He had no other choice than to reinforce that image, if he wanted to make money by convincing others that it worked. He was trapped in a liminal place where he could not reject *setevoi markeing* without destroying the myth he had created in alliance with his business partners. Everything became a simulation; *setevoi marketing* was an

invitation to another world, a world of liminality as described in risk societies. “In the form of liminality associated with gambling, logic functions side by side with passion; the rules of cause and effect cease to exist; luck, rather than hard work reigns; and ordinary people are transformed in a magical moment into millionaires, champions – or homeless beggars.” (Thomassen 2014: 164)

The Astana discourse as a modernization vehicle for Kazakhstan on its way to a bright future was connected to cultivating a new type of government workers – loyal and efficient state bureaucrats. Thus, the well-being of the new political elite was a priority, as can be seen from the special privileges, bonuses, promotions, and state-subsidized housing for which they were eligible. These efforts were successful in raising the prestige and status of government jobs in general. In return, the ‘new ideal civil servants’ were given the responsibility of transforming society, first, in the capital and, from there, changes were supposed to radiate out into the rest of the country. The new ideal type of government worker is best exemplified by graduates of the Bolashaq program. Asyl, as a Bolashaq graduate, belonged to the privileged youth class and was part the future elite of Kazakhstan. Despite her young age, she was already working for the Innovation Project at the Ministry of Finance. Herself very ambitious and hardworking, she wished for more vigor from the people in her environment, as she was readjusting to Kazakhstan’s realities after living in Washington, DC. She viewed her job as an important experience that would lead to a future career later in the private sector. The Toastmasters Club provided a platform for her to cultivate leadership and self-presentation skills, both of which were needed to stay competitive and acquire social and cultural capital. Asyl was trying to balance herself between ‘two types of elite,’ the old one and the new progressive youth, with which she identified herself. The ‘old’ type of youth included the children of rich officials, who spent most of their free time at VIP bars and restaurants. Asyl was critical of them and preferred her Toastmasters peers instead. Bolashaq graduates cultivated a different culture; they saw themselves as in between two worlds. On the

one hand, they wanted to change Kazakhstan to make it more efficient and modern. But, on the other, they had to adjust to reality 'on the ground.' They wanted reforms, but they did not want to change the regime. With their new tastes, preferences, and worldviews, they distanced themselves from ordinary people. They saw themselves as technical experts, who specialized narrowly and competed with each other for the same promising jobs, be they in the state apparatus or the private market.

Dilnaz positioned herself primarily as a *gossluzhashiy*. Astana offered many new prestigious jobs and positions, among which government jobs were in great demand. Dilnaz successfully managed to build her new identity as a government worker. Astana promoted specific 'elite' usage of its urban spaces. These 'elite spaces' were represented in the materiality of the architecture and further embodied in the VIP rooms of restaurants and bars. State servants were transforming Astana's urban space into 'elitist' space, in Setha Low's (2000) sense, such that social interaction induced spatial meanings. Dilnaz made use of new opportunities to promote herself, as the example of her admittance to the Academy of Public Administration demonstrates.

For Dilnaz, it was important that she benefited from what Astana had to offer. She enjoyed being part of a privileged group of government workers and also knew that, otherwise, she would be deprived of monetary and other bonuses. However, she was also aware of political realities, as she boldly stated, "They say that we are a democracy and a secular state, but in fact there is no democracy here. If you say or write something critical about Nazarbayev, you will lose your job tomorrow." For her, it was better to be on the safe side and eventually receive a subsided apartment or a good job as a judge. For many civil servants, it was a question of being a member of the club and reaping benefits, rather than being critical and excluded from the spoils. Dilnaz justified the bribery and corruption in which she was involved as a temporary solution until she became a judge who would not be 'greedy,' but just and fair.

The government's efforts to transform the political elite remained ineffective against a background of widespread corruption. Denying a plurality of opinions and open discussion hindered reform of state structures and government workers, who were afraid to lose their jobs if they engaged in criticism. The discussion of alternative visions and futures was not an option; the trajectory of transformation had already been decided. Kazakhstan's goal of becoming one of the most developed nations in the world was itself a vague utopia. In the meantime, the general population was left to solve its problems on its own or wait patiently for the benefits of the capital's prosperity to reach the rest of the country without its involvement. The elite was expected to confine itself to living in a modern and European-like capital with shopping malls and entertainment centers, which it occasionally visited. In this process, its members were becoming ever more disconnected from the masses.

Thus, the project of creating new civil servants remained only partially successful since Bolashaq graduates were only a tiny minority, who did not influence how the government worked. This recalls the project of Brasília, which failed to achieve the ideal and goal of social egalitarianism through architecture, and even resulted in the exact opposite (Holston 1989: 23). Brasília reproduced the social and economic inequalities the project was supposed to eradicate, which Holston describes as the "Brazilianization" of Brasília because the differences between social groups were deeply embedded in society at large. Astana does not pursue the goal of social egalitarianism. Moreover, the privileging of state workers further increased overall socioeconomic disparities between elite and non-elite. As a 'developmental regime,' the Kazakhstan government understands its role as securing progress in terms of growth and competitiveness, rather than pursuing equality and the welfare of the population as a whole (Koch 2012: 167). Finally, Ong suggests that "reimagining or redesigning an urban milieu in changing material infrastructure, political possibilities, or aesthetic styles…is by definition aspirational, experimental, and even speculative" (2011: 12). Therefore, the results

of social engineering through urban planning yielded multiple and sometimes contradictory outcomes.

Raima, who felt estranged by the Toastmasters members, was still able to carve out a space for herself in Astana. Most importantly, her income allowed them to stay on in Astana, in a place about which many ordinary Kazakhstanis in other parts of the country only dreamed. In 2009, Raima said she would not stay in Astana. But in 2010, when I met her again, she was still in Astana. She said, "Well, I will not find the same kind of job in any other town. That's why I am still here! I just wouldn't!" She still shared a three-room apartment with four or five roommates and dated her Russian boyfriend. Without prospects for a better job, Raima was literally stuck in Astana, unable to move or change her situation. She said:

> It is not like I forgot the hardships, but something in me accepted the city. One gets used to everything in the end. But it has all become more acceptable and affordable now. I will try not to get stuck in this city. If I get a chance to go somewhere else, I will go. I would not want to live here all my life. I would like to live in a more compact, comfortable, and familiar city because, well, I don't know why.

Raima's liminal phase had become fixed for an uncertain period. It was a never-ending battle, since she could not leave Astana, but had to keep working and trying to improve her situation. The marginalized and poor were also complicit in their situations, even if they were passive and did not participate in the existing power arrangements. As Koch asserts with regard to Kazakhstan, "Their absence and their silence is what supports the regime, insofar as the regime colonizes this passivity just as much as the activity of the attendees" (2012: 180). I argued that legitimization occurs also as part of the emergence of liminality's new temporalities. Thomassen claims, "Liminality opens the door to a world of contingency where events and meanings – indeed 'reality' itself – can be molded and carried in different directions" (2014: 7). The neoliberalism-backed development discourse in Kazakhstan only made space for a rather restricted kind of liminality, that manifested itself as 'career making and consumption.' The stories newcomers told of the heroic endurance of the adjustments to

living in Astana produced a new spatiality for liminality. The city's dominant narrative of progress and development forced newcomers to uphold the hyper-image of Astana, while effectively remaining trapped in the circles of their never-ending struggle to survive.

CONCLUSION

In Astana, newcomers searched for their share of luck. For many, it was an obvious choice in light of Kazakhstan's booming and flourishing new capital, which promised a future full of hope and economic opportunities in the "city of the future." Indeed, the sight of constant construction, glimmering hotels, and shopping malls communicated a message of progress and prosperity. Astana experienced a major influx of domestic migrants from the country's southern regions and northern regional towns who wanted to find better jobs: ordinary people rushed into the construction sector and affluent and educated people entered careers in the state apparatus. The service sector was also booming in Astana. Numerous expensive restaurants and shopping malls appeared in the new administrative part of the city – the Left Bank – as well as in the old part of the town, to meet the demands of the political elite. Those who relocated from Almaty complained about the poor physical and social infrastructure in Astana. There was a huge demand for labor in pre-capital Tselinograd/Aqmola in order to modernize its rundown, crumbling Soviet infrastructure.

Moving the capital from Almaty was President Nazarbayev's initiative, which the parliament approved, despite widespread skepticism from the elite, as well as general public, at the time. Nazarbayev justified transferring the capital as almost a requirement for starting the regeneration of the country. He claimed that it was a dream that had come true: dreams and hopes of freedom and independence for the nation were expressed in Astana, making it the heart and pride of Kazakhstan (Nazarbayev 2006: 253). The construction of the capital was supposed to engage wih the challenges of the 21st century, leaving behind the Soviet heritage of a rundown infrastructure, dilapidated houses, and morally outdated industry. Astana was to be built according to a masterplan and supported by international expertise. The state's international political goal was to earn praise for Kazakhstan's achievements, with Astana representing an oasis of wealth and prosperity. At the domestical level, Astana nurtured a sense of pride and patriotism and distracted Kazakhstan's people from pressing

social issues such as corruption, lack of affordable housing, and unemployment. Nazarbayev's regime controlled the media and self-censorship protected the regime from criticism; political participation was very limited at best.

During my field research, many of my informants agreed that it was a good decision to move the capital to Astana. They regarded it as Nazarbayev's triumph. Doing so vastly contributed to his domestic popularity. Beyond this, Astana's symbolic side, which projects progress and development, outshines reality, making Astana a hyper-city because the image exists independently of reality and actual material conditions. In light of a grand project like Astana that becomes solely the matter of the ruling political elite or the president himself, political participation became muted. In this light, criticizing Astana is tantamount to betraying one's country, to being unpatriotic, and to not realizing the historical significance and meaning of the project. As Koch summarizes, "the Nazarbayev regime employs the paternalist/developmental tactic of providing of economic opportunity (if meager), stability, and its ability to stimulate…emotions of pride (e.g., through sports, beautiful cities, spectacles – in short, the *imidzh proyekta*)" (2012: 203).

Kazakhstan is not alone in trying to promote itself as a global 'brand' through its capital. Cities throughout the world have done this as a result of global competition for investment, new-economy industries, and changing market pressures (Glick Schiller and Caglar 2011). Dubai has impressed many skeptics, who pointed to the rigidity of Muslim norms, in embracing what globalization has to offer and building outstanding skyscrapers and a skyline in an effort to become a global financial and transportation hub (Haines 2011: 165–169). In the meantime, Dubai has turned into a "wonderland and shopping Mecca" (ibid.). In other words, it has become a "playground of the rich and famous," with its indoor ski slope and manmade islands (Ong 2011: 212). Similarly, Astana is trying to attract the flow of global finance and international actors, and with that, to gain world recognition and leave behind the image of a corrupt, post-Soviet, struggling country. However, western observers are largely

critical of these efforts, calling it "Dubaization," which refers to "an outlandish urbanism of spectacle, fakery and caricature" (Elsheshtaway 2010: 251, cited in Roy and Ong et al. 2011: 321). Such remarks disregard similar cases in commentators' own countries, such as the World Trade Center in New York City as in image project, for instance (ibid.). Western media's reception of Astana has likewise been critical, claiming it is a Kazakh Disneyland, image promotion, and lacking in good taste and uniqueness (Bissenova 2012). However, these one-sided accounts do not do justice to the meaning of a project like this. Astana can be considered part of Kazakhstanis' search for identity; they are "under construction" (Steiner et al. 2014). However, I agree with scholars who judge such projects problematic because of an absence of internal political debate about questions of urban futures, ideas, identities, and city branding (ibid.: 10). Ong argues that borrowing from the West or from each other, and appropriations that cut across class, ideological, and national borders could also contribute to new unexpected urban terrains (2011: 5). Hence, as the case with Astana shows, "despite ambivalence about progress and disgust at dominance and arrogance, the blueprint of Gulf urbanism is being adopted in other parts of the Arab and Islamic world" (Steiner et al. 2014: 11). These adoptions are taking place in countries such as Kazakhstan, too. Astana's futuristic architecture, nonetheless, needs to be placed in the context of the spectacular rise of Asian cities that produce their own versions of what it means to be global, or "worlding" practices from below (Ong et al. 2011).

Against this background, the aim of this dissertation, as outlined in the introduction, has been to look at the day-to-day experiences of newcomers in Astana and to see how they use urban space and are influenced by their new built environment. I positioned my research within a broad framework of the production and construction of urban space (Low 2000, 2009) and employed a socio-spatial approach, thus taking space seriously by paying attention to how built environments help define human behavior (Gottdiener and Budd 2005: 144). This is a two-way process according to which "people create and modify urban spaces while

at the same time being conditioned in various ways by the spaces in which they live and work," thus forming a socio-spatial dialectic (Soja 1980). Hence, social space is socially produced but, as people occupy the very spaces they have produced, they gradually accommodate to the built environment surrounding them by transforming it and making it meaningful for them.

Informed by these theories, I asked what concrete social practices emerged in Astana, influenced by its new built environment and urban context. In this sense, people's activities, identities, and social relations have been influenced by the Astana discourse about the promising "city of the future" and its corresponding futuristic built materiality and aesthetics. Various social actors creatively engage with the official narrative, instead of simply rejecting or accepting it. Newcomers [*priezzhie*] have constructed urban space in Astana, too; they are not passive and have their own "spatial stories" to tell (de Certeau 1984). These stories and practices included the formation of a new collective identification of *priezzhie*, promiscuous lifestyles, liminal housing practices, and, more generally, neoliberal subjectivities that have resulted from adjusting to urban space. Moreover, they have accommodated themselves to the built environment by means of collective renting, which translated into stories about acquiring independence and maturity. However, other stories were about an extended youth phase and not being able to enter real adulthood, due to the lack of stability in housing and jobs. Many young *priezzhie* remained in a process of protracted youth, which can be described as extended liminality. In the view of these findings and insights, I have argued that Astana's urban space was especially conducive to the creation of practices of liminality. Newcomers, by and large, overidentified with the Astana discourse: they wished to remain there and become 'new' residents of the new proud capital. To this end, they were ready to endure all kinds of hardships, from accepting crowded living conditions and insecure jobs, to meager job prospects, dubious and even risky working relationships, and even being cheated by their employers. Astana led them into a never- ending search for largely speculative dreams, such

as purchasing a new – hitherto unaffordable – apartment and finding a rewarding job and an ideal partner, which all seemed near at hand, but also hard to attain. For many, giving up was not an option, since that would mean they would lose out to all the others, who kept trying and investing their time and energy in achieving the Astana dream. Therefore, they were trapped in a liminal phase of waiting for a promised better life, while the dream kept being deferred to an uncertain future. In the meantime, the present became merely a 'waiting phase,' encompassing all the contradictions, displacements and disconnections which made up their multiple and complex everyday realities 'on the ground.' In my exposition, I have showed how these processes unfolded. The liminal phase became a huge 'bubble,' which served as justification for and legitimization of the actual current problems in their lives.

In Chapter 2, I discussed the dynamics of the transformation of collective identification among newcomers in Astana. I defined the *priezzhie* based on their own definition and argued that, as such, they are *liminal personae* undergoing identity transformation in a liminal phase. Presenting biographical sketches of four different newcomers – Alima, Arsen, Elena, and Masha – I traced how older divisions along various fault lines were challenged and reinforced in a context where every second person is a newcomer. This new social demography was a challenge for many, and they easily reproduced regional stereotypes with ensuing derogatory connotations, such as those relating to people coming from the southern parts of Kazakhstan. Due to rural-urban animosities, rural *priezzhie* likewise found themselves not readily welcomed. Still, what united all newcomers was the desire to call Astana their new home. This was largely acknowledged by both recent and old newcomers. All the old and new stereotypes and divisions could be challenged and even rejected by *priezzhie* while they were undergoing a status transformation. In the meantime, considerable mixing was taking place, such that place of origin lost some of its importance, as long as there was evidence of eagerness to change and to adapt to the new conditions in Astana, and to be flexible and tolerant of others. In fact, in order to integrate into Astana, it

was crucial for people to accept these differences. Understandably, this was not easy for everyone. Changing status from being a *priezhiy* to an Astanchane took longer for rural and southern *priezzhie* than for those coming from the north or urban regions. Former Almaty residents had already gained this *Astanachane* status due to their privileged status as pioneer government workers. Locals were outside the competition for a new status of an Astanaian and as such posed no trouble to newcomers. They were largely even ignored by them.

Ethnic identification also made a difference. Since independence, the turn to ethnic redress justified the campaign to assert the primary role of the titular ethnic group in Kazakhstan (Schatz 2004: 74–84). National capitals usually serve as a centerpiece for political, cultural, and social life. The relocation of Kazakhstan's capital to Astana and the influx of ethnic Kazakhs transformed the new capital into a symbol of Kazakh nationhood. This is reflected in the status of the Kazakh language, which gained prestige in Astana. There were almost no Kazakh schools in pre-capital Tselinograd and now they dominate the capital, just as the ethnic Kazakhs did. Astana was being built up as a city with a 'Kazakh face' where government positions and ministries seem to be mostly reserved for ethnic Kazakhs, as Elena's case demonstrates. In Soviet times, urban spaces were 'Russian spaces,' while the countryside was relegated to presenting 'authentic' (viz. backward) Kazakhness. This has changed and in Astana, urban space became Kazakh space as well, not only demographically, but also linguistically and symbolically. The dominance of the Russian language in the public urban sphere still made it harder for rural Kazakhs to assert their standing over Russified Kazakhs and ethnic Russians; they had to find a balance by adopting urban ways, including speaking the Russian language, in order to be considered 'civilized' enough. There were conflicting ideas about what makes urban space Kazakh space. Nonetheless, the official discourse of Astana as a melting pot uniting all Kazakhstanis and leveling out their differences became a powerful message, with which not only Kazakhs but also Russians identified. Towards this 'harmonious future' where differences were reconciled, Astana

created again a sense of liminality to which otherwise marginalized people like Elena and Masha were ready to submit their agency. For the locals of pre-capital Tselinograd, reduced to an insignificant past and unable to catch up with the capital's flow, identification with this discourse could happen only through intimate knowledge of pre-capital Tselinograd and appreciating the changes the capital has brought them.

In Chapter 3, I considered housing and renting. With increasing stratification and polarization in Central Asian societies, huge disparities have become apparent in terms of access to housing and accommodation. Housing is the thing that newcomers in Astana identify as the most acute issue upon their arrival. The expansion of the city led to the creation of extreme wealth on one side and relative deprivation on the other, which were evident in Astana. Spatial stratification divided the center with its bright lights and numerous facilities for the wealthy from the rest of the city. The poor were relegated to crowded apartments and the city's edges. In addition, elite villa-type houses made the spatial stratification even more dramatic when compared with modest private houses with no running water in the outskirts of the city.

In the Soviet Union, there was a social contract between the state and citizens, but in the early 1990s, a crisis of legitimacy ensued when the state could no longer fulfill welfare promises (Alexander and Buchli 2007). Afterwards, there was a 'comeback' of the state asserting its power, which can be seen in the modernization program launched by the government, which included, in a prominent place, state-subsided housing. However, this was mostly reserved for a privileged group, while the rest of the population had to rely on their own efforts. Many took expensive home loans, *ipoteka*, which contributed to a housing 'bubble' and a crash in 2008 and 2009, leaving many thousands desperate as they watched their homes taken away by the banks.

I described how, for many *priezzhie*, collective renting in Astana was the only way out of this difficulty. I argued that collective renting also allowed newcomers to integrate quickly

into the city, since many people found themselves in a similar situation. Renting without leases was a solution for many newcomers to stay, leave, and come back depending on their financial circumstances and job situations. It allowed them flexibility and brought about very individualized lifestyles, which many also enjoy for a certain period of time. Their temporary housing in shared apartments with no leases freed them from responsibility and gave them a chance to enjoy their freedom to have private lives with relaxed rules and morals. However, the dark sides of such temporary housing arrangements became very apparent. Many newcomers had to move from one apartment to another and had to accommodate strangers as roommates or even share rooms with them. There was no privacy in such shared rooms and many faced restrictions on having private lives, inviting friends, and keeping up relations with their extended families. Mostly young people, who are single and unmarried and often without stable jobs, continued to live in shared rooms for extended periods, but many wished to have their own housing, to stop moving, and to start a family and raise children in Astana. I described these positive liberating aspects of liminality, as well as its negative imprisoning sides, when discussing the situation of many renters in Astana and their lifestyles. At the end of the day, renting was unstable and insecure, which was accepted only as a temporary option for the younger generation. The elderly and those who could not eventually afford to buy an apartment or improve their housing situation felt trapped and could even face social exclusion and isolation. Thus, young peoples' passage to adulthood was postponed as they continued staying in shared apartments. Renting conditions stopped being optimal then and this could be seen with elderly and young families who felt imprisoned in their 'liminal housing.' As such, Astana's urban space became unaffordable to many *priezzhie*.

Chapter 4 was about the new urban diversity emerging in Astana under the influence of different flows of capital, ideas, and people from neighboring and distancing countries. This was a significant factor and had an impact on the trajectories of many individual lives. Cities are known to invite various deviant behaviors, which can be innovative and creative,

but also dangerous in transgressing established social norms. The dual nature of cities encompassing both vice and virtue is not new. Already in the 19th century, there was ambivalence about cities; on the one hand, there is the excitement, diversity, and fluidity as depicted by Walter Benjamin's famous *flaneur,* the stroller who is captivated by the dynamism of cities. On the other hand, George Simmel writes about the psychological implications of estrangement and alienation resulting from overstimulation and the disruption of social cohesion (Knox and Pinch 2014). These ideas have influenced other urbanists such as Robert Park from the Chicago School who saw cities as "dark, dangerous, disordered, as well as exciting, stimulating, and liberating places" (ibid.: 159). Due to the spectacular rise of cities worldwide, cities have grown and changed into distinct, complex social environments. Astana's urban space also had these different sides, which can be considered as possessing liberating as well as risky and dangerous aspects; this made Astana attractive for many young people who enjoyed leisure activities which had been unavailable in their small towns or villages. Dating and sexual relationships provided good insights for exploring transgressive and 'deviant' behavior in Astana. Many enjoyed this incredible relaxation from the standards of their relatives and communities after moving to Astana. Moreover, young people acquired more freedom through employment opportunities which made them independent from their parents and reduced the parents' influence over their choice of spouses. However, these freedoms, too, were restricted, since traditional gender roles were reinforced, partly through the revival of nationalist discourses and religious discourses influenced by transnational Islam. Along with these restrictions, conspicuous consumption restricted many young people from imagining alternate lifestyles, since new pressures to measure up and stay abreast with the latest fashions were dominant in shaping their aspirations. Men and women found themselves mastering these new demands which both increased and restricted their freedoms and dreams of self-realization and independence. Again, many remained trapped by these new constraints. In the end, marriage was still desired by many young *priezzhie*; it was just

postponed. The experiences of young and single women and men in Astana were about play, the temporary suspension of social and moral structures, and moments of experimentation. However, none of these young people were as free as they wished since they were constrained by traditional gender roles, the social need for marriage and family creation, and fulfilling filial duties.

In Chapter 4, I discussed various strategies for becoming successful in Astana. Individual competition was now widely accepted in post-Soviet Kazakhstan: People relied on themselves to solve their problems. Following the career aspirations of my informants, I could observe how they used the social and economic resources the city had to offer. Astana as the 'city of opportunities' promised that anyone could become rich there; just like the discourse of the 'American Dream,' the 'Astana Dream' captivated the hearts and minds of many newcomers who dreamed of a new beginning in the capital. Inspired by Astana's outward appearance ambitious people like Ivan wished to become rich businessmen. By examining the pyramid scheme of the Tiens Group, I showed how the built environment and the capitalist spirit contributed to making such speculative activities convincing for many. Many people believed that in Astana anything was possible; the monumentalist architecture pointed to splendor and wealth, which appeared available to everyone who was ready to strive and struggle. There were many rich people in Astana who displayed their wealth. Ivan was caught up in the utopian idea of becoming an independent and successful businessman, regardless of his lack of necessary education or skills. He found *setevoi marketing* appropriate: pyramid schemes confirmed and fed his utopian vision, according to which anything becomes possible. Ivan developed an entrepreneurial form of subjectivity supported by neoliberalist ideas of self-reliance. The Astana discourse supported the principles of the market economy, which required citizens to take full responsibility for their own lives. Hence, those who wanted to stay in Astana had to be tough and remain optimistic. In this light, there was no sympathy for

the poor or for struggling people in Astana. They were blamed by the more fortunate for not working hard enough.

The cases of Asyl and Dilnaz showed clearly how government workers received far more benefits than ordinary citizens. These two young women were captivated by the idea of making themselves fit for a personal future as competent civil servants. In the meantime, they tolerated temporary disconnections from this ideal, since corruption, limited political liberties, and the regime's control were all too present in state structures. Dilnaz justified giving bribes to get 'ahead' in the present by envisioning not taking bribes or be involved in corruption in the future, once she had become a judge. It was a perfect excuse, supported by her liminal position which allowed her to compromise her morality. Bolashaq graduates like Asyl were, in turn, busily creating a new image for themselves. Many like her had friends or relatives who were also studying abroad or had returned after doing so. They showed a certain detachment from politics; there was some interest in political processes in general. But they chose to concentrate mostly on their own careers. Bolashaq graduates strived to master technical expertise and wished to gain experience by working for the state before eventually transferring to the private sector. In the process, they supported Nazarbayev's development discourse because it opened up opportunities for them, and they also said that directly contributing to the development process made Kazakhstan more competitive and 'modern.' They admired the president for his vision, thereby legitimizing the regime. Nazarbayev in his book asserts that the transfer of the capital happened as a result of his unshakable will which he pushed through despite a 'conservative-minded' parliament (Nazarbayev 2005). Beyond this, he claimed that Almaty's political elite was old, lazy, and skeptical, while he himself wanted energetic, open, and young civil servants (ibid.: 20–23). Asyl and Dilnaz could readily identify with this image, seeing themselves as a new generation of civil servants. But both of them were for the time being captured in the career-building and self-development process.

It became clear from the stories of Asyl and Dilnaz that Astana was a city built by the state for the state because the space produced was designed to accommodate the needs and desires of government workers first and foremost. The political elite acquired new office buildings, were allocated subsidized apartments, and regularly received awards or bonuses; it could be said that the shopping malls too were built for their convenience, so that they could enjoy Western standards of leisure as in other affluent countries. In return, these 'new' civil servants were expected to work hard, be efficient, and remain loyal to the regime. Thus, new divisions were born in Astana of government workers vs. the rest of the population. The state contributed to stratification rather than promoting equality in terms of access to resources. Under such conditions, the rules of the market economy left the socially vulnerable and marginalized to tend to their own needs with limited state support.

In conclusion, I argue that various social actors were all actively shaping and reinterpreting and reproducing Astana's urban space. But at the same time, they were conditioned and restricted by that space by expensive housing and limited jobs. Newcomers as new agents participated in appropriating symbols and creating new meanings through their use of space and through their behavior and interactions with the city's built materiality (Low 2009). *Priezzhie* reproduced the discourse of hyper Astana and accepted its negative aspects or their failures as temporary difficulties, which they would overcome through hard work, relying on their entrepreneurial subjectivities. Astana's new futuristic architecture covered up many problems, disguising liminality behind a façade of utopian visions; at the same time, social practices influenced dissimulated liminality. For the sake of utopia, hardships were ignored, conflicts were resolved, and divisions were removed, even before being addressed and discussed, as is particularly obvious in the case of the sensitive question of the Russian minority. Salvation was coming and its harbingers were already visible. If the ideal had not yet been fully achieved, one needed to wait patiently. The liminal zone was thus a perfect stage, where all contradictions could be accepted as passing; they would be solved

automatically in the promised future under the wise leadership of Nazarbayev. This perception restricted virtually any possibility of even imagining alternative futures.

In light of all this, what are the implications of the specific context of Astana, where liminal practices have emerged? How does my work contribute to urban studies of the Central Asian context? To whom does the city of Astana belong? One could say that Central Asian urban spaces have become more stratified, very uncertain, competitive, and highly individualized, all of which was institutionalized by state capitalism with limited accountability and democratic legitimacy. Economic inequalities experienced in Astana in terms of access to state jobs and housing were acutely felt by my respondents, but not experienced as problems they could influence or change through demanding more accountability from the state. The desire to be involved in politics in order to change the unjust system or lessen corruption was also not on the agenda of my respondents. They accepted the given inequalities and the corrupt system as givens and merely adjusted to them. They largely did not recognize that greater democracy brings more equal opportunities to succeed in life. Instead, they relied upon the rules of the market economy and individual competition. The regime remained unchallenged.

Cities attract migrants with the possibility for higher income and better living conditions. The futuristic architecture and symbolic meaning of Astana as a new face of independent rich, market-oriented Kazakhstan provided a framework for justifying many newcomers' move to Astana. Elsewhere in the world, rural migrants are increasingly moving to urban areas in search of better futures; in this, their stories are connected to global narratives of 'better lives' imagined in urban centers, be it abroad or within the borders of a domestic territory. Stability is exchanged for the excitement of the city, for expectations rather than realistic prospects. In a much-discussed book by Doug Saunders, *Arrival City* (2010), based on journalistic accounts, the author discusses urban aspirations in the developing world, where the influx into cities can be observed. Saunders outlines a map of 'arrival cities' in the

Global South. He claims that for poor migrants coming from the villages, the city is a solution for their poverty that offers healthier and more interesting lives. This is an optimistic narrative about the city as offering hopes and dreams, much like the discourse of Astana as the "city of the future." However, in the light of my own findings, such celebratory accounts should be accepted with caution, since as much as cities offer opportunities, they can also become a form of entrapment, where an endless chase after a 'good life' makes people accept their precarious jobs, housing, and lives. Dubai is not really comparable to Astana, but some parallels can be still drawn from the stories of migrants in Dubai as described by Chad Haines (2011). Migrants' identity is connected to the success of Dubai itself and, despite harsh working conditions, even exploitation, and living in shared apartments with no space for visitors, they exercise self-censorship and self-policing (Haines 2011: 175–176). Haines argues that for the sake of being global, "negative aspects are eased, ignored or apologized" (ibid.: 178).

This resonates with a broader observation that Bauman makes; he argues, "Liquid life is a precarious life, lived under the conditions of constant uncertainty" (2005:1–2). In addition, Bauman in *Culture in a Liquid Modern* World (2011) claims that, "Hunting is a full-time occupation in the state of liquid modernity," which means that individuals are increasingly caught up in accomplishing endless goals, which consumes all their energy and time, leaving only little time for reflection. The need for the excitement of the chase is different from early modern utopia, which is about the mission accomplished and task finished (ibid.). In contrast to this, the current times of liquid modernity are characterized by unattainable goals which continuously keep the "hunting" and "chasing" alive. In this connection, Thomassen (2014) warns against the dangers of viewing liminality as overly positive, which puts too much emphasis on creativity, openness, and boundary-breaking experiences while ignoring the impeding negative consequences. At the end of the day, liquid life is much more precarious for those living in the Global South.

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